

3 C XVI

—シーキューブ—
CubexCursedxCurious

episode CLOSE / the last part

水瀬葉月
Illustration ゑろりがため

A detailed illustration of a young anime-style girl with short, light blue hair and large, expressive purple eyes. She is wearing a white dress with pink ruffles and a large pink bow in her hair. She is posed in a dynamic, slightly crouching position, looking towards the viewer with a slight smile. The background is a soft, light pink gradient.

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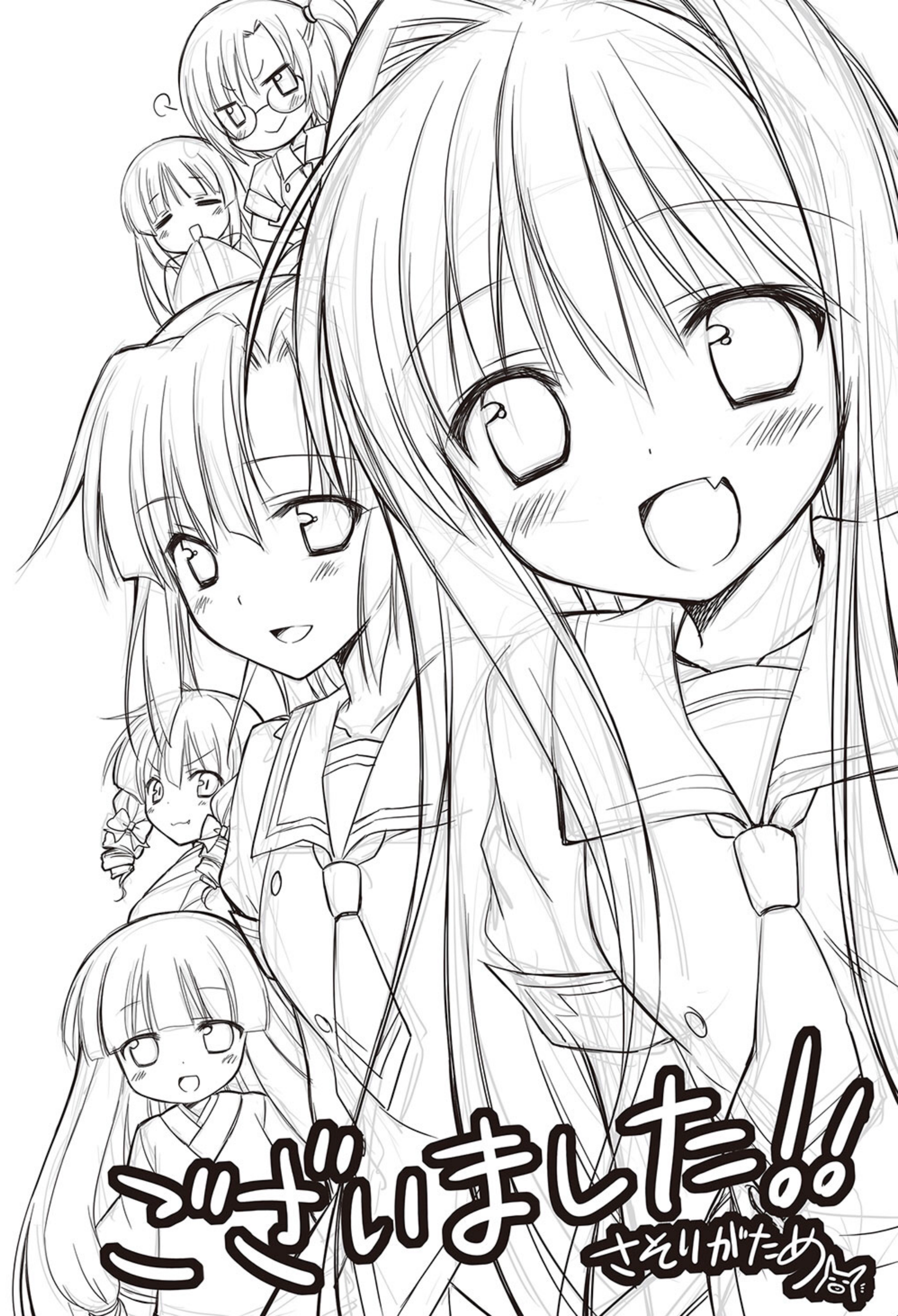
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« -interlude- A: "at night" »

Staring at the smile on Kuroe's face while she was pinned under him—staring intently—

Pendragon was instantly shocked.

"...!"

Inserting his finger into Kuroe's mouth, he forced her jaw open, only to see at the corner of her lips...

Saliva dripping down, mixed with a red liquid.

"Hey... Are you trying to commit suicide by biting your tongue?"

She was serious. Had he not stopped her, she definitely would have bitten her own tongue off.

Pendragon felt greatly shaken after realizing this. He found it incomprehensible.

"—Why? Why do you have to go this far...?"

"You're asking me why?"

Kuroe was still smiling with a philosophical expression. This also troubled Pendragon.

"I don't intend to kill you. I just want to make you mine like Riko and Granaury, so I won't do anything excessive to you. No matter what, that's better than dying, right?"

"Is it~? But to me, it's the same as death."

"What?"

Pendragon frowned. Kuroe remained calm and composed as always.

"Freedom is what I desire. Being cursed, I've caused trouble to many people. My curse was lifted after I moved to Haru's house. This was something I decided on my own, having led this kind of life."

After a pause, she smiled again.

"I want to enjoy my life. To enjoy life freely, unfettered by anyone or anything. If my *freedom* was taken away... To me, it would be the same as death."

That was why she tried to commit suicide by biting her tongue? Pendragon still could not understand.

Even so, he was at least certain that Kuroe was speaking the truth from the bottom of her heart.

She was truly resolved to take her own life.

He felt the pain of a certain emotion stirring in the depths of his heart. A pain that shook him, the strongest being.

How unlike him. Why was he so flustered? Hurry and calm down.

"Oh, I won't run away or bite my tongue anymore. Can I get up now...? Upsy-daisy."

Hearing her say that, only then did Pendragon discover that his hand had released Kuroe already. Standing up, Kuroe patted her backside. Staring at his finger, covered by Riko's armor—the finger that was moistened from her saliva and the blood from her injured tongue—Pendragon said:

"...If you actually died, wouldn't the result be the same?"

"Hmm, if I still died after doing everything I can, then it can't be helped. It's not like I want to do this, but if I was captured by force and deprived of freedom, it'd be the same as death... At least if I'm gone, you guys won't attack Haru, Ficchi and the others again, right?"

She was right. But as soon as she died, nothing would matter anymore. Pendragon still could not understand.

"By the way... Why are you at the shop? What do you hope to accomplish by cutting my hair? Did you really think you could change my mind by doing this?"

"Hmm~ About this, I was just thinking 'you still haven't expressed yourself' but that's on a different issue."

Kuroe spoke suggestively and turned her body slightly towards him.

"Still haven't expressed myself...?"

"Yes, that's right, but I guess I could give you a hint after saying so much already. You may find this incredible coming from me—Anyway, I don't actually hate you. But I feel that before doing all the many things you've done so far, there is something else you really should be doing first~"

"...!?"

Just as Pendragon was puzzling over Kuroe's words, which remained mind-boggling as ever, in that very instant—

"By the way."

Gone from her face was the aloof smile of a martyr's—

Instead, it was replaced by her smile of a mischievous child's, unfathomable as always.

"I said I won't run away, right? I lied."

Without warning, Kuroe extended several bundles of hair. Instead of reaching for Pendragon, her hair targeted the shelves behind her, the underside of a nearby beauty parlor chair, as well as a decorative plant's pot. Reaching the various destinations, her hair performed some kind of pressing action. Instantly—

White smoke filled the shop's interior, immediately making it impossible to see anything at all.

"Maximilian!"

Riko cried out. Simultaneously, the excess armor behind his head swiftly rearranged itself to cover his head like a helmet. Although it reduced his field of vision, her armor was able to seal his head completely in a mode of thorough protection. Riko was probably taking precautions against a poison gas attack.

However—

Pendragon understood that this gas did not pose any threat. It was simply a smoke bomb, a diversion. Despite being a place of business, this was her castle after all. It would not be surprising if she had laid traps for situations like these, but using poison gas for real would be far too dangerous.

Pendragon was able to reach these conclusions instantly. Nevertheless, his legs did not move. Neither did he allow them to.

...Even though delicate footsteps could be heard fleeing out of the shop, behind the smoke.

"Hey, what's wrong?"

"Aren't we going to pursue, master?"

Even after hearing these two's inquiries...

Pendragon did not move an inch.

Amidst a view entirely obscured by whiteness, what he could still currently see was—

Those eyes of hers, seriously wanting to commit suicide by tongue-biting...

As well as her smile of resolve, sacrificing herself for her way of life.

—Undoubtedly, that *strength* unique to her had branded itself deeply into his eyes.

« -interlude- B: "at midnight" »

"It's dead obvious—Your target is that, right? Give it back."

"Ouch...!"

"Shiraho!"

The hand on her shoulder exerted even more force while his other hand gripped her arm firmly. What brute force, like a vise, her bones felt like they were almost fracturing. The cellphone that had taken so much work to obtain fell just like that.

—Not working, impossible. Of all people, a squad leader. I underestimated him.

(But—)

Only Sovereignty... To be frank, Shiraho did not care the slightest about what would happen to the other students. But only Sovereignty—

She had no choice but to take things into her own hands. The dark-skinned girl was standing by under the stairs some distance away. She might hear if Shiraho cried out loudly for help but there might not be enough time. It could also draw in other enemies as a result.

With an arm and a shoulder in the enemy's clutches, Shiraho forcibly turned her body and tried to deliver a slap with all the strength she could muster from her entire body, hoping to give Sovereignty the chance to escape—However, the enemy was not naive enough to let her plan succeed.

"Futile."

Her wrist was caught with a light sound. The burly man's face was right in front of her eyes, his monstrous pressure filling her with despair—But just at that moment...

Behind his head...

Shiraho saw a certain steel-colored solid object swinging swiftly towards him.

Then it directly struck the back of the squad leader's head with a dull thud. His head shook for a while and he also released Shiraho's arm, but—

"Gah, urgh... W-Who..."

"Hmm."

Despite stumbling greatly, he forced himself to remain standing, his legs pushing forcefully against the floor. Sluggishly, he turned his head back—

"N-Now is the time! The Dangerous Special Attack!"

Instantly, Sovereignty controlled the doll that had fallen on the floor earlier, causing it to jump up hard. With a certain degree of mass and hardness, the metal doll rushed rapidly at...

The stumbling man's crotch.

"..."

Normally, this man might have been able to withstand the impact, or blocked instead, but right now, he was also suffering a simultaneous blow to the back of his head. Struck by the double attack, the man instantly sank to his knees.

"Ugh... Oh..."

"Definitely a difference in training methods. Most people would have fainted from that attack just now."

While speaking, the new arrival swung the metal shovel in her hand, delivering yet another blow to the back of the man's head.

With that, the man finally collapsed. Nevertheless, he was still moaning, evidently not completely unconscious yet.

"Too resilient. Is some kind of power at work...? We must not waste too much time on this fellow. Hurry and escape."

"You..."

"S-Sensei! You're fine?"

Sovereignty whispered with her eyes staring wide.

Dressed in a red tracksuit, a scar on her face, a shovel always within arm's reach—This was precisely Shiraho's homeroom teacher, Kaidou Imi. In stark contrast to their surprise, she nodded with a calm expression on her face.

"Yes, I have been pretending to be hypnotized until now, because I feared that a reckless move would be dangerous."

"How did you escape the hypnosis?"

Shiraho asked while picking up the knight's cellphone, prompting Kaidou to tilt her head in puzzlement before answering simply and decisively:

"Hmm? How could a few simple words affect me? As soon as the public announcement system was used by someone who was neither staff nor a member of the broadcast club, I already prepared myself mentally: The message is not worth listening to."

Shiraho and Sovereignty looked at each other. They originally thought Kaidou was joking but that did not seem to be so.

Resting the shovel on her shoulder, Kaidou spoke with complete seriousness:

"I am nothing more than a weak and ordinary human, but precisely because of that, I will not lose to anyone in force of will. That is the kind of person I have been striving to become all along. At last, I have evidently succeeded this time and avoided getting bewitched by the enemy's ludicrous heresy. Yes, I must continue to train here on."

Sovereignty brought her hand to her lips and whispered discreetly in Shiraho's ear:

"...So she overcame it by sheer force of will?"

Who knows, perhaps it was simply because she is an idiot? Shiraho thought to herself but simply shrugged silently.

Because she did not want shovel punishment for speaking tactlessly.

« -interlude- D: "at predawn" »

Kana and Taizou were spacing out, looking up at the ceiling in the secret room. Checking their cellphones, they saw that it was dawn, but they were not sleepy at all. Because they had taken many naps already by this point.

Just at this time—

"Ahhh, I've had enough!"

Waiting for the commando unit(?) to return like them, the underclassman—Chihaya—roared in agitation while standing up at the same time. Just as Kana was thinking Chihaya could no longer tolerate this kind of situation where they had no choice but to wait—

"...Listen up, you guys, don't mind me at all. And please don't ask any questions. This is really nothing."

"Huh?"

The younger student had glared at them viciously while speaking in a hoarse voice...

Then, still dressed in gym clothes, she started to dance.

Slowly, calmly, waving her arms, lifting her legs in gliding motions, she rotated her body.

Judging from those slow and graceful movements, it might be wrong to simply call it a dance.

Indeed—More accurately, this was a Japanese dance.

"Ohoh!"

"Wow~ What is this? Fitness exercise? Oh right, you'll get stiff if you stay in this kind of place without moving your body~"

While the two of them were staring at this scene—

"Please allow me to speak in fear and trepidation. You really don't have to pay attention to this~ It is the *curse* belonging to us, the kagura bells~"

"So you end up doing the explanation huh... Yeah, whatever. Anyway, that's what's going on, so ignore me."

It was quite a challenge to ignore someone who was dancing right before their eyes.

Kana and Taizou looked at each other.

"A curse huh..."

"Wow. I guess... they do exist..."

Kana thought back again to what their classmate, Un Izoey, had told them.

Ruminating over it in her mind all this time, the information had already been chewed to pieces.

Curses. Cursed tools. Cursed tools that took on human form after receiving an immense amount of curses. How to lift curses. Organizations aiming to destroy cursed tools, organizations wanting to learn various things...

But to Kana and Taizou, few of the details were important.

"Fear-chan... umm, is actually a cursed tool and not human."

The foreign transfer student who showed up one day out of the blue, a cute silver-haired girl. Kana liked her the moment she laid eyes on her. She was also very cute in the way she was ignorant about the ways of the world. Kana had always thought it was due to Fear growing up in foreign lands, but that was actually wrong. In the beginning, Kana had heard that Fear was brought here by Haruaki's father. In actual fact, she was living in Haruaki's home only for the sake of lifting her curse.

"Yeah. The same goes for Konoha-san too."

Taizou spoke while staring into the distance. Naturally, Kana understood what was going through her best friend's mind.

Her, whom he thought he knew. Fear, whom she thought she knew.

Not only that, but they had also found out about the Haruaki, the superintendent and Kirika whom they thought they knew—

In the end...

Things could be summed up as they had been lying all along, Kana thought.

Everyone's personality was different. Perhaps some might react in anger, others in disgust.

However, how should she put it? Oh right.

Because they were definitely not the smart type.

Always doing stupid things together with Fear, Haruaki and the others, they were truly nothing more than very stupid humans.

"Even after hearing that they're not actually human... In the end, all I can think is this: Fear-chan is Fear-chan and Konoha-chan is Konoha-chan~"

"That's right. After mysterious secrets were added, I find them even more attractive instead."

Chihaya continued to dance with a scowl on her face. Narrowing her eyes, Isuzu was watching her with a gaze carrying complicated emotions.

A curse. They must have things tough. It was probably something so terrifying that there was no way for Kana and Taizou to imagine or to understand—something that could not be understood easily.

These girls, acquiring human form after an excess of curses had been piled upon them.

However, it did not feel real at all. After all, she was very stupid.

She had failed completely to notice the terrifying curses they possessed.

However, all she kept recalling were other things unrelated to curses.

At the sports festival, Fear was in tears because she did not know how to dance, yet she still tried her hardest.

At the cultural festival, Fear was dressed as a cute nurse to serve customers. She also helped the swimming club by putting on a school swimsuit, almost illegal in various ways.

On a certain ordinary day, a spider had appeared in the classroom, causing Fear to hug Kana while screaming tearfully.

Of course, there were many other memories. Laughing together. Happy things. Funny things. Incredible things. All very trivial, nothing special, but wonderful nonetheless.

However, what Kana recalled now were her tears.

Surely, that was what they should be thinking about while in this place.

"Right now... We're in big trouble."

"Seems like it. Look, our situation is already like this."

"That said, we can still chat like this... But how should I put it? Fear-chan and the others must be facing even bigger trouble."

"Yeah. From what we heard... That's so true."

"What do you think things are like for her right now?"

"Probably similar to what happened when your group messed up on the cookie cooking practical last year. With tears brimming in her eyes, Fear-chan said 'I screwed up the amounts.' She was so depressed. That was what it was like."

Something like that happened? Kana smiled wryly. Indeed, back then, they had hastily used the remainder of their ingredients to bake a new batch of cookies. Everyone helped together but took care not to interfere too much while they watched Fear working hard, offering advice to her. Hence, she managed to bake very tasty cookies in the end, despite their small number. After that, Fear had smiled very beautifully.

That was Fear: gentle, cute, and with a strong sense of responsibility.

Cursed? Kana could not care less.

Not human? Kana could not care less.

Ultimately, Kana concluded that what they needed to do had not changed.

It was the same as that time.

"Now that something serious has happened, Fear-chan is most likely holding back tears in her eyes right now... So, let's move out, Taizou-san?"

"You're right. Let's move out, Kana-san?"

The two of them smiled at each other.

Although it was unclear what they could do, they decided they must take action. This counted as moving forward.

"Because she's Fear-chan. If she's crying... We must help her."

"Well said. I also have to show Konoha-san my manly side."

Without any actual special significance, but as a kind of ritual, the two of them bumped fists.

After finishing the Japanese dance, Chihaya watched them in head-tilted puzzlement. Deftly and diligently using a handkerchief to wipe sweat off Chihaya's brow, Isuzu suddenly turned her head—With a click, the secret room's wall started to turn.

Everyone tensed for only a moment. After seeing the people appearing at the entrance, they all breathed a sigh of relief.

Showing up at the entrance were three classmates as well as the homeroom teacher who had joined them for some unknown reason. As much as Kana wanted to ask them what was going on, there were more important things to do first.

The dark-skinned classmate was holding a cellphone in her hand.

Showing a contented smile in a rare moment, she said:

"Time to strike back."

"I was waiting for you to say that," Kana answered, smiling as well.

Chapter 4 - Fear Cubrick / "Call x Compel x Conterminous"

Part 1

The time was six in the morning right after dawn. One had to say they had slept for too long, but as a result, they had recovered their physical stamina. Naturally, the same went for mental energy too.

"Yes. Then Shiraho and Sovereignty stole that guy's cellphone huh.."

Haruaki was listening to Un Izoey on his cellphone about everything that had happened so far, the process that made it possible to communicate in this manner now.

This phone call was very important, but that did not prevent Haruaki from paying attention to what was before his eyes. In front of him, just as he was about to enter the living room, was the sight of fluttering silver. Close, almost to the point of pressing against him tightly, there was the fragrance of her hair.

And farther in front of them...

Inside the living room they were about to enter, Honatsu was there with Kirika who had already woken up from a nap, as well as Kotetsu and Konoha who had just returned from their surveillance task outside. Among them, Konoha was standing motionless with legs apart, glaring viciously at Fear.

"What is with that Venus de Milo-style attire of yours...?"

"Given the situation just now, this is the only thing I could wear. I'm getting changed as soon as things are settled."

Like earlier in the bedroom, Fear was simply wrapped in a blanket.

"W-What is the situation just now...? Wait, by the way, you finally decided to turn back into this form?"

Fear suddenly avoided eye contact.

"...Yeah. Because Haruaki said he wanted to see me in my human form and touch me like this. Since he can't bear it any longer, I had no choice."

Saying that, she even pressed her back tightly against Haruaki. Then keeping that posture, she moved her back up and down for some reason, rubbing herself against his body. Grabbing Haruaki's other hand that was not holding the phone, she guided it to the front of her abdomen.

"This child's attitude has apparently changed 180 degrees...!"

"Gah... I suppose this is an improvement in the overall situation... But in terms of feelings, I can only say... Honestly, this is... Absolutely ridiculous...!"

Sensing a murderous aura instantly filling up the living room, Haruaki held his hand on the receiver and said:

"O-Okay okay, everyone calm down. Anyway, let's focus on the phone call for now. Okay, hurry and sit down, let's sit down in harmony."

One could hardly call this business as usual, but at least everyone was able to find a space to sit down at the table. It would not be right to complain about the torn and tattered seat cushions either.

'My question... Did something happen on the other side? I guess this kind of guess.'

"No, it's nothing. Anyway, I've switched to speaker phone, so tell us everything you know. This includes what you think we're able to do and what you hope we can accomplish. We are willing to do anything and will also tell us everything we know."

Now that they had seized one of the enemy's communication devices, it was probably quite unlikely that their conversation would be suddenly cut off like last time, but not impossible. The enemy might take countermeasures against the stolen cellphone, hence every precious second right now must not be wasted.

Besides—

The deadline for "Dominionization" was approaching, second by second.

Time was of the essence.

'So—' Un Izoey began to recount the information she had acquired.

The situation in school. The repeating lessons taking place due to hypnosis. The students' resetting memories. The person applying the hypnosis was apparently not inside the school.

Haruaki also explained what they had found out. The cursed barbed wire—«Auschwitz-Birkenau»—as well as its durability. The enemy had said it was "no one may enter or leave anymore"...

Honatsu looked up at the living ceiling and said:

"Hmm~ Known as Taciturn Chatterbox, the person applying the hypnosis is outside the school huh...? If only we could capture her. Then with that, we'd finally make a great stride in progress towards rescuing the students who are being held as hostages."

'My agreement: exactly. But her location is unknown.'

"There's also one major problem, that of «Auschwitz-Birkenau» preventing all people from entering and exiting the school... We must resolve this problem, right? A cursed power to completely deny entry, how absolutely ridiculous. There ought to be a solution."

With grave expressions, everyone went over the facts they had learned.

They were unable to come up with a perfect solution simply through discussion. In that case, they had no choice but to continue racking their brains in contemplation. They had no choice but to contemplate what was within their power to accomplish.

Haruaki reorganized the current situation in his mind.

Their final goal was to pull out or destroy «Dieu le veut» that was stabbed into the school sports ground, to prevent the Knights Dominion from achieving this town's "Dominionization."

To this end, the major barriers that must be overcome could essentially be divided into two problems.

One consisted of the students held in school as hostages. Even after releasing the students from hypnosis, they still had to prevent harm from coming to the hostages when charging into school. Conversely, if they did not take precautions on this front before charging into school—The Knights Dominion would probably not hesitate to harm the students. This absolutely must not be neglected. The countermeasure would be to locate and eliminate the woman named Taciturn who was said to be outside the school.

The second problem was how to enter the school, how to break through the cursed barbed wire that was securely defending this space of the school. A simple lack of information beleaguered this point. What should they do to penetrate that barbed wire barrier to enter the school? Whether finding loopholes in cursed powers or neutralizing it through destruction, what exactly should they do—?

Just at this moment, Un Izoey suddenly muttered:

'By the way, they still haven't arrived?'

"Huh? What did you say?"

'Nothing much. Before making this call, I contacted them first as a matter of priority. I remember they said they were going to head to your place...'

Incomprehensible. Haruaki tilted his face. Just at that very moment—

A patter of footsteps were heard.

They were coming from the unrecognizable veranda, in other words, from the garden outside the house. Konoha and Kotetsu instantly stood up, but after exchanging glances, sat down again.

Haruaki could also gather a faint idea that these footsteps probably did not belong to strong martial artists, because the rhythm was irregular and a little clumsy, reminiscent of a child running in panic.

In actual fact, what appeared was also a child running in panic.

"Huff... Huff...!"

"A-Amanda?"

A white-haired girl wrapped in bandages, panting heavily, Amanda Carlot. A former member of the Knights Dominion, she now owed her allegiance to the Lab Chief's Nation after a convoluted series of events—also having lived in this home for a period of time—a person with a complicated past and affiliations.

With sweat covering her forehead, she took a while to catch her breath while staring at Haruaki's group.

Then placing her hand on her skinny chest, as though swearing an oath...

"...I want to repay, the debt, I owe you all."

"Huh?"

When Haruaki turned his head back to look at her, the introverted Amanda suddenly lowered her gaze in embarrassment.

"Umm... Also, because, that person, considered my senior, must be rescued."

"From my standpoint, I really wish she had said that as her first reason. Well~ I am the organization's leader after all. Keeping up appearances is a big thing in this country too."

"...!"

Slowly emerging from behind Amanda was Yamimagari Pakuaki, dressed in his dashing black lab coat as always. Konoha and Kotetsu threw a wary gaze at him,

Kirika frowned, whereas Fear kept staring straight at him for some reason. Completely unfazed by everyone's gaze, Pakuaki shrugged lightly and said:

"You guys should just think of this as a continuation of the earlier cooperative agreement. We can't lose Un Izoey either... A way must be found to save her. Would you allow us to join you in devising solutions? This former member of the Knights Dominion, Amanda, could help render many of your unknowns into knowns."

"Yes, I know, several things. Will tell you, everything."

Haruaki first looked at members of his group in turn. Everyone had plenty they wanted to say, right? But they probably all understood that there was no time now. In other words, they had no choice.

"...Fine. Thanks for the help."

"Now that's the right attitude."

Pakuaki grinned and entered the living room, pushing Amanda's back from behind. Taking a seat while saying "It's been so long since I last sat on tatami," he placed an object carried in his hand on the table.

"What's that?"

"Just an ordinary notebook computer. Since we're strategizing, it's best to have all participants present, isn't it?"

Pakuaki opened the computer and operated swiftly, thus displaying the image of a familiar eccentric on the screen. The man in the gas mask.

'Hello, I heard that you've made contact with the inside?'

The superintendent was sitting with his back against what appeared to be a very comfortable seat with tinted car windows in the background. It looked like a stationary car that was parked somewhere.

"Superintendent, are you okay?"

'Thanks to everyone. Zenon-kun and Ganon-kun are alive and well too.'

After the superintendent's shoulders shook with light laughter, voices could be heard coming from offscreen: 'What do you mean, 'alive and well'? I'm totally tired to an unprecedented degree~' 'We are the same as always, so please do not worry.' Then—

'Boo~! I'm here too~'

A familiar little girl poked her head into view from the side.

"Oh it's you, Kuroe. Didn't you find a place to hide?"

'...Hmm, because quite a lot of things happened~ Anyway, I've been kidnapped by the superintendent and his subordinates, so I must listen to their orders obediently~'

"What are you talking about?"

In any case, Pakuaki's computer was providing teleconferencing functionality. In that case, the superintendent's side definitely could participate in the strategizing.

But at this moment—

"All participants... Hmm? That's right. That means everyone has gathered here. So, they also..."

Looking down with a complicated expression on her face, Fear suddenly whispered. She threw a glance at the cellphone on the table then said:

"Umm... Before we start strategizing, I want to confirm first... Rather, I want to settle this first... No, maybe it might not be settled. Umm—"

Fear was not being very coherent. However, Un Izoey seemed to understand everything just from what she said.

'I will put them on the phone.'

"Wha—? Wait, I need to prepare myself first as well!"

Naturally, Fear's panic did not reach Un Izoey. After a period of rustling noise—

'Hello~? Fear-chan~? How are you~?'

'Hey Kana, that's so unfair! There's me too—! Can you hear me?'

"...Kana... Taizou..."

Fear's small face suddenly became distorted. Due to relief—as well as other emotions. Fear pursed her lips tightly, then nodding firmly as though encouraging herself, she said:

"Kana, Taizou, I—must apologize to you two. Actually... Umm, I'm... not human."

"H-Hey, Fear! It's better if I explained, right? Uh, first of all, thank goodness you're all safe. I think you two must have heard many things already, but since I'm sort of like her legal guardian, let me explain. Because it's my responsibility. Uh, where should I start...?"

"Haruaki, don't get in my way! I have to tell them personally—!"

Just as Haruaki and Fear's faces were pushing against each other...

From the phone came a very straightforward—

Truly, it was a very straightforward voice.

'Yeah, Un-chan told us already~ Both Fear-chan and Konoha-chan are cursed tools and not human, right? Oh dear~ We totally didn't notice... Also, you're both trying to lift your curses, right? It must be rough!'

"What...?"

Kana was probably holding the cellphone, which was probably why Taizou shouted as loud as he could, transmitting his slightly distant-sounding voice.

'Haruaki, you're too sly! I can't believe you were living this kind of double life like an undercover agent! That's too cool! It's always been my dream to go "I've got a secret mission today... Hoho" while leaving school early! You've got to tell me your courageous exploits next time. So much must have happened so far, right? You hear me?'

Haruaki was left speechless. Fear was also staring with her mouth gaping wide.

They had not told Kana and Taizou the truth the whole time. Stated bluntly— They had been lying to them all along.

By now, they were totally consumed with guilt.

Even if Kana and Taizou were to get angry and shout profanities...

Or fearing their curses...

They decide to quit being friends, Haruaki and company would only accept it as unavoidable. That was what they had always thought.

And had prepared themselves to accept.

However...

Kana and Taizou remained the same as always. Speaking with the same attitude, no different from when chatting after lessons, they said:

'Haha~ I think I can imagine what faces Akki and the others are making. Sheesh, don't underestimate us. My love for Fear-chan will conquer everything. Don't forget that I'm the girl who hugged her as tightly as possible the instant we met, okay?'

'Love... That's right, well said~ C-Cough, although it's completely unrelated, hello to you, Konoha-san! I'm doing good too! Oh, I'll be visiting your house next time, to listen to Haruaki's secret courageous exploits, so I'm looking forward to your company then!'

"S-Sure..."

Haruaki had no idea if the response reached the other side, but in any case, Konoha answered ambiguously while staring wide-eyed with her mouth open. Kirika's shoulders were trembling lightly while she whispered her usual catchphrase with a gentle smile.

'...So, let's end the pleasantries here. What should we do next~?'

'We're willing to help out in any way, so just tell us. Rather, it's been too boring so far and my body's stiff. Hehe, I'm ready for anything!'

At this point, Haruaki felt Fear's shoulder shake intensely once.

"...Got it. I'm so happy, thank you. Umm, as for whether there's anything we need your help with, that's what we're starting to discuss next... Could you hand the phone back to Un Izoey?"

'No problem~'

Fear's voice sounded vague and feeble.

She was trying too hard to suppress her feelings.

However, everyone present understood the reasons. Even the people not present understood too.

This was in order for her to hold something back.

In order to desperately hold back a certain thing that might start falling nonstop as soon as she relaxed.

Probably in the process of handing the phone back to Un Izoey, random noises were heard again.

During this time...

Like a massive water droplet finally dripping from a tightly turned tap...

In a voice so feeble that it was almost inaudible—

Fear repeated the same words.

These were the most important words that presumably occupied her entire heart.

"...Thank you."

Part 2

Rewinding back slightly earlier—Last night.

After literally plunging Pendragon into smoke in order to escape from the Dan-no-ura, Kuroe was running in the streets.

"Oh man, I forgot to roar in laughter. Maybe I should have left behind the words 'Huhahaha, so long, Akechi-kun!'..."[\[1\]](#)

There were probably no more future opportunities to use her treasured emergency escape device that she had originally installed in the shop partially in jest, she thought. What a shame to have wasted this rare opportunity.

Staring blankly up into the night sky, she was thinking "so, what should I do next?" when she noticed a car suddenly slow down after passing by her side. Then it started to move slowly, following her pace beside her.

In the next second, the car door opened and out reached a hand—pulling her into the car.

"Wah~ I've been kidnapped~"

"Hahaha, don't say something that will lead to misunderstandings."

For just an instant, her heart really skipped a beat, but she became reassured after hearing the voice. Sitting in the car's back seat, next to her was the gas mask-wearing superintendent. Kuroe looked over to the driver's seat to see Zenon nodding at her lightly as a greeting. Ganon was collapsed in the front passenger seat motionlessly with her limbs all limp.

"Renting a car to drive along the streets is also a great way to perform reconnaissance. And once we receive emergency news, we can also move instantly without worrying about the Knights Dominion finding our whereabouts and attacking us."

"In other words, a mobile hideout? Then take me along for a spin... What have you guys been doing so far?"

The superintendent explained what had happened so far. Back when the Knights Dominion showed up, they happened to be just outside the school, so it was truly a close shave. They then hurried over to help out at the Yachi home after Honatsu contacted them. In order to stall Pendragon, they had fought him again—

"..."

Hearing they had selflessly put themselves in harm's way to stall for time, Kuroe was extremely grateful to them, feeling that no amount of thanks would be enough. But as soon as she recalled how she had later stayed at the Dan-no-ura beauty parlor to deliberately wait for Pendragon's arrival, she felt quite apologetic because it was as though she had wasted their efforts to a certain extent.

"Then we rented a car and started roaming the streets. While calmly contemplating our next move, we also needed to gather information. Besides, there seems to be a few squads of knights strutting about in the town nonchalantly. If possible, we also want to patrol while we're at it, to prevent them from causing unnecessary commotions."

"What about the police?"

"We can't rely on them this time. Apparently, someone is putting pressure on the police. And it's coming from higher-ups that are impossible to oppose for the connections I've slowly accumulated over the years."

A sigh came from beneath the gas mask.

Then the level of seriousness increased in his voice.

"Right now, the Knights Dominion has occupied my school, so it is my duty to protect the school and the students within... It is also for this purpose that I've worked hard all along to acquire influence in this town. Now that all this is in peril, I must step up to fight with everything I've got."

"...Yeah."

"I will protect everyone. Whether it is the school, the students, this town... To this end, I will do anything."

As though swearing an oath to himself, his statement was strong and firm.

But next, as though to balance his excessive seriousness just now, his tone of voice turned light and lively:

"Especially on the town side, it's very hard for Haruaki-kun's group to take care of, right? I hope you can pass the message to them and tell them not to worry."

"Understood~ But specifically, what are you planning to do?"

"Hmm? Well, I guess I have to start mobilizing troops... Hoho, but not limited to manpower alone, for I've been training as a beast tamer lately. Now that I've decided I'm willing to do anything, I will make use of that side too."

"Beasts... Like a Doberman for example?"

"Haha, indeed, something akin to that. Judiciously using animal feed alternately laced with poison and antidote in order to tame them, like 'If you don't want to die, eat tomorrow's feed with the antidote.'"

The superintendent's shoulder shook while he spoke. Kuroe did not quite understand what he meant by animal feed, so she simply tilted her head in puzzlement and remarked "What are you talking about?"

"Next... During this time, we spotted a familiar figure from behind, so we tried to kidnap you. I can't believe you're loitering out in the open while under pursuit. That's really not a great idea."

"Ah~ Hmm~ Well, I guess this is part of a plan."

Actually, I was facing off alone against him at the Dan-no-ura and just made my escape—Kuroe really could not bring herself to voice these words. She simply explained how she had left Haruaki's group on her own to avoid putting them at risk, which was technically not a lie.

"Oh...?"

The eyes behind the gas mask could not be seen, but he might have realized something. Even so, he did not pursue the matter.

Kuroe exhaled. Now was truly a good opportunity.

"That person... Basically, is he very tenacious?"

"You mean Max? Well... I suppose."

"I believe his personal convictions can essentially be summed up as 'plain and simple' and 'rushing headlong into things.'"

"Too tired, agree with the above~"

A voice from the front passenger seat chimed in as well.

Speaking of which, Zenon and Ganon knew Pendragon too. Judging from their voices just now, Kuroe could get a sense like they were recounting a relative's naughty kid's exploits in exasperation. With such great familiarity between them, there was naturally no need to mince words. Kuroe felt deeply curious.

"I want to hear about your past. As his hunted target, I'd like to know more about him."

"I don't mind, but you probably know most of it already, right? Picked up and raised by the previous Commander, he is a Draconian through and through. Unbelievably, he and I got along quite well together, yeah, kind of like rivals. It was a sparring relationship."

"What about Zeno-Gano-san?"

"...You mean us?"

"Yeah, it's a short form to refer to us both. Fewer words, less tiring. Approved~"

"How should I put this? As one's «Blaze» rank increases, you gain the privilege to take in disciples. Hence, they started to follow me and naturally, they came to know Max."

"Then the same goes for the other side... Oh right, I think someone mentioned that those two weren't by his side back then, were they?"

"Granaury was present back then, except that she was not by Pendragon's side."

Slowly leaning himself against the seat rest, he looked up at the car's roof and said:

"Indeed, she was present since a long time ago. For some reason, she was very close to my partner Liz—the «Treason Piercer». The 'spear whose power increased the farther it was thrown' and the 'spear whose power increased the shorter the separation'... Like foils, the two of them were both spears full of contradictions. Perhaps it was like birds of a feather? Thanks to this layer of relationships, Max and I got to know her for a very long time."

"Ohoh~ I can imagine catfighting scenes like 'There is no spear better than mine!' back then. Oh dear, you breaker of women's hearts~"

"Hahaha, Liz and Granaury actually became friends first. I was just an accessory."

"..."

Hearing the superintendent's response, Kuroe noticed Zenon and Ganon exchanging sideways glances with each other while sighing in exasperation. As a girl herself, judging from their attitudes, Kuroe's sensor of maidenly feelings

instantly reacted—But there was no need to expose things on purpose. And compared to Granaury, she was more interested in understanding Pendragon.

"Back to the subject, I'd like to ask about my stalker. Is he the kind who never gives up?"

"Hard to say. He can just as well fit in both extremes."

"Indeed. When full of fervor, he will chase to the ends of the earth no matter what obstacles he encounters, but as soon as he loses interest, he will cast it all aside without another thought."

"Hmm... I wonder which is it right now? If only there was a way to make him lose interest in me..."

"Did you do something to make him lose interest?"

Kuroe pondered for a while then shook her head.

"Oh dear~ I'm not too sure myself, but I only toyed with him a little. Besides, if his objective is my power, I think it's hard to make him lose interest... But somehow, I get this vague feeling that certain things could be changed..."

"Sigh... You really did do something on your own, after all. That's way too reckless."

"Ah."

Crap. A slip of the tongue.

The superintendent then said in apparent exasperation:

"Listen carefully. Even if he seems easy to get along with and easy to talk to—He is the leader of the Draconians, all things considered. The strongest man, the closest thing to a dragon. This is not an analogy. He really could crush you with just a single finger. Do not lower your guard towards him for even a moment... I would advise you not to approach him again."

"That's what I'd like, but he's chasing after me anyway."

"True."

"By the way, you can't guarantee that this car is absolutely safe, right? Perhaps he's currently jogging in the adjacent lane right now... Hmm, just imagining that is scary enough already. I guess I really should find a suitable chance to leave this car, right? I can't get you caught up in this."

"No no no, rather, it would be better to say that we're here precisely to avoid getting caught up, so don't you worry... Even if he finds us, we've got a dragonslayer sword here that could buy some time at least."

"What, that kind of legendary weapon exists!? How much gold did you spend to buy it?"

Kuroe looked left and right, but could only find Ganon's hand waving from behind the front passenger seat. It was some kind of joke after all, right?

(Putting that aside...)

Kuroe operated a switch to open the tinted car window by a few centimeters. A refreshing night breeze caused what could be considered her other self, her hair, to flutter. The coolness made her exhale "Haww."

It was time to decide on the next move.

Given the current situation, was staying on the run the right choice? If the Yachi home were to be lost during this time, Kuroe could not stand back without doing anything. The deadline was noon tomorrow. Before that time arrived, what was the most correct thing to do?

Closing her eyes, lost in these thoughts...

Kuroe was gradually guided into the realm of dreams by the cool night breeze and the car's vibrations.

The signal that woke her was the sound of a cellphone ringing inside the vehicle.

Kuroe instantly opened her eyes to see the superintendent take out a cellphone from his pocket, then start speaking with a tilt of his head.

Several minutes later, a notebook computer was set up between the driver and the front passenger seat. Shown on the screen was the usual living room. Transmitted over was everyone's usual voice.

Fear was one of them. Her head of silver hair was glittering brightly. While she listened to her friends' gentle words, her shoulders trembled.

(Fufu, in any case, now's not the time for hesitation.)

Next up, in order to liberate the school, in order to release "Dominionization."

In order to protect the Yachi home—She had already decided to put in everything in her power.

She was definitely worried about Pendragon, but she also felt that the current situation did not allow her to go into hiding alone.

There was not much time left. Fear—and everyone else—was moving forward. Then she had to catch up to them too. No matter what happened next, the more help the better.

When the time came—What if that man were to appear again?

Hmm, she would decide when it actually happened. Kuroe easily swept away the worries that surfaced in her mind.

In the worst case scenario, she would simply have to finish off what she only managed to do halfway back in the Dan-no-ura.

Part 3

The strategy conference had already ended.

The result was that they now had a target. The most fortunate thing was that Amanda originally belonged to the Knights Dominion and not as a combatant but an auxiliary mainly in charge of support and intelligence gathering. Combining knowledge from Amanda, the school's interior situation provided by Un Izoey's group, as well as external information they had obtained outside the school gates, they finally managed to determine their next target to work towards.

(It's just that for the moment... Some parts require a gamble on possibilities. Carrying out a crucial mission without concrete evidence as a basis, how absolutely ridiculous... But there's no time after all...)

Kirika was pacing aimlessly inside the house, pondering their next move again. There was no harm in putting more thought into it. Because this concerned their lives as well as this home's future.

It was currently seven in the morning or so, which could be considered preparation time before the operation. In particular, this time period was meant to wait for the superintendent's faction in their car to gather the final and necessary information.

Then using this free period of time to make necessary preparations—unlike Chihaya and the others in school—their group was not large at all. After setting off, they were most likely not going to return home until the incident was settled, hence, everyone took turns to shower and get changed, thus refreshing themselves. This already counted as the most important preparations.

Kirika had just borrowed the bathroom to take a shower. Deciding that now was the best time for checking over their plan in her mind and to cool down her body temperature, she had descended into the garden to take a stroll.

Had they missed anything? Was the operation going to be carried out without problems? Which were the riskiest parts? Suppose a flaw appeared, how should they patch it up then...?

Thinking over these matters, Kirika spoke aloud to herself on occasion, simply walking nonstop along the edge of the house.

Hence, when she turned the corner leading to the back of the house—until the person waiting there for her spoke up—she did not notice his presence. What a massive miscalculation.

"Hi, Kirika."

"...! Yamimagari Pakuaki...!"

Kirika instantly backed away and entered a wary stance. After glancing at her bare right arm, she clicked her tongue and swiftly surveyed her surroundings.

"There's no need to be so wary of me. You're breaking my heart."

"Absolutely ridiculous. Did you really think I couldn't guess what the absurd *deal* you proposed was about? The method to remove this suit without dying.. Had I known about Fear-kun's situation at the time, the answer would've been dead obvious. Disregarding whether this method of using a large number of Indulgence Disks to forcibly remove this suit could work theoretically, in actual fact, I will absolutely not use it. I've already vowed from the bottom of my heart to never believe you again. Even right now, I swear I'll never believe you again...!"

"Oh my oh my, that doesn't really count as me lying, right...? Hmm, whatever, what I want to talk about now has nothing to do with the deal at all. I just have a present for you."

After taking out a certain object from his pocket, Pakuaki tossed it over to her.

Kirika involuntarily caught it. Unable to discern his intentions, she frowned with a troubled look.

She had seen this thing before. But why was he giving it to her?

"For you. Use it as you please."

"...What are you planning?"

"Nothing, totally nothing at all. Just this once, I sincerely wish to assist you and your friends. I not only hope for Un Izoey to return unharmed but also for you to

stop the 'Dominionization'—Besides, I also want Fear-in-Cube to obtain the final Indulgence Disk."

"Wha...?"

These words were truly impossible to believe.

"That's why I will help in every way I can, in order to improve the odds of the plan's success. That's also why I'm giving my little sister a small present."

While Kirika remained stunned, Pakuaki swiftly turned around and departed. But in the last instant, he smiled at her over his shoulder—

"Of course... It's also because it concerns whether my precious little sister will return safe and sound."

For some reason, that smile—

Looked completely free of malice, without any hint of ulterior motives.

Seriously, it was like a smile a brother would make while worrying about his younger sister.

No way—Clearly... Absolutely impossible.

Not possible at all.

"W-Wait! But even if you say that, this thing..."

"You should be able to handle it. If you really have questions, there should be someone more suitable to ask than me, right? I'm off."

Pakuaki departed on foot.

Kirika could only stare at his back silently—

Then all she could do was accept the object that she had carelessly caught.

"..."

As though covering up something unpleasant, she stuffed it into her pocket brusquely.

Now was the bit of preparation time given to them while waiting for the superintendent's faction to gather the information they needed before setting off.

After shoving Haruaki into the bathroom forcibly, Konoha decided to finish final preparations first.

She decided to do what absolutely must be done first.

"Fear-san, please lead the way to your room."

"...Got it."

The girl obeyed directions with unexpected obedience. Perhaps she had prepared herself already.

Leaving the living room, they walked along the corridor. During this time, the two of them did not exchange a single word.

After Fear opened the sliding door, Konoha walked into the room. It was a mess inside as usual. At least tidy it up a bit. Konoha was filled with contradictory feelings, wanting to do some major cleaning on one hand, but unwilling to clean up after this girl on the other.

"That?"

"Yes, that."

"Both of them are here, right?"

"Of course."

The two of them conversed minimally as necessary. Fear rummaged through the mountain of clothing that had been left on the tatami floor after being worn, then finally took out the Rubik's cubes.

Held in her left and right hands, a total of two.

Konoha reached out without saying a word and snatched the Rubik's cubes from her hands.

"I know this is meaningless. Even without Rubik's cubes, you can use anything as long as *it is something cube shaped*—However..."

"I still won't be able to use them suddenly. Because what I'm the most familiar with is still the Rubik's cube."

Fear bowed her head, murmuring softly.

Regardless whether she was able to use other things as substitutes, this cube-shaped toy definitely could be considered the symbol of Fear's brutality.

Hence, despite the fact that it was meaningless in practice in terms of restraint, for the sake of expressing her clear and firm will, taking away these two Rubik's cubes first was definitely not meaningless.

It was like a ceremony.

In order to prevent her from forgetting what she must not forget, to place a set of shackles on her psyche.

"—Until everything is over, I shall keep these for now."

"Yeah."

Without waiting for Fear to agree, Konoha stuffed the two cube-shaped toys into her pocket.

With that, the job was done. However—perhaps it was still necessary to confirm.

Surely, the other party understood this too. Fear spoke up on her own initiative:

"Hey, Cow Tits."

"What is it?"

"Do you remember back when Peavey showed up? The plan we practiced while hiding in the accessory dwelling."

How could she possibly forget? Because she had just recalled the situation back then.

"Of course, I still remember."

Fear gazed at her with serious eyes.

"So, I don't need to repeat it again, right?"

"Correct."

Konoha answered immediately.

Indeed. She could not possibly forget. In the end, things still returned to that time.

No, rather, perhaps one should say that things were backtracking only because there was a reason.

Right now, her answer had changed from before. Now that he really did get hurt, there was no guarantee that his life would not be in danger next time—

If Fear were to be devoured by darkness again.

When time came. When time came—

"..."

Their purpose of coming to this room was finished. Konoha turned around... But in the end, she asked a question. A suggestion akin to offering a choice. Turning her head, she said over her shoulder:

"—Wouldn't it be better to inform Kotetsu as well?"

"Hmph, not necessary."

Fear crossed her arms and spoke arrogantly.

Konoha suddenly narrowed her eyes and asked:

"...Why?"

Upon hearing that—

Fear smiled cheerfully and replied somewhat refreshingly:

"Because I told him already. Earlier when I just woke up and was looking out the window. He happened to be walking on the outer wall in front of me, so I asked him."

In other words—

With this relaxed attitude as though ordering a pizza, as though setting a date to go out with friends to have fun—

She had already started preparations a long time ago.

For the sake of swiftly terminating herself, in case of emergencies...

Secret preparations, which must be kept from Haruaki's knowledge.



Part 4

Morning, while Haruaki and company were making final preparations at the Yachi house...

Naturally, those inside the school also had their own preparations, although that meant taking risks to a certain extent.

"Say, I'd like to make a trip to the changing room first. I really want to ditch these gym clothes."

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation: There probably isn't time for that right now~ Once the break between periods is over, it will be difficult for us to move around, right~?"

"Gah... I can't believe Isuzu can give such correct reasoning..."

"You also need to consider the situation afterwards~ Perhaps you might be able to move around more naturally precisely because you are wearing gym clothes, although this does depend on the location~"

Another set of correct reasoning. Chihaya could only slump her shoulders and sigh.

"...Got it."

Making use of the break when students started to walk around the school building—naturally, they were in a cycle under hypnosis—Chihaya left the secret room and began to make her way to the destination. Due to needing a bodyguard just in case, but Un Izoey's appearance attracted too much attention, she was accompanied by Isuzu, whose combat strength was only second to Un Izoey. However, Isuzu's shrine maiden outfit was equally conspicuous, hence she swapped outfits with Un Izoey's school uniform, thus giving rise to a mysterious being with the dark-skinned shrine maiden attribute.

There were other students dressed in gym clothes inside the school building, hence so long as she did not do anything out of place, Chihaya probably would

not attract the knights' attention. Sometimes she saw patrolling knights in the distance, but there was no problem as long as she treated them as nonexistent just like all other other hypnotized students. Not looking at them, ignoring them.

After walking like this for a while, Chihaya and Isuzu reached their destination successfully.

In front of them was a corner in the specialized classrooms block. Next to the chemistry lab, there was a door with the nameplate "Chemistry Preparation Room."

Chihaya looked around discreetly to confirm the absence of knights nearby. Then taking out the purse from her pocket, she used the key holder inside to open the door. In the very beginning before seeking refuge in the superintendent's office, Chihaya had made a quick visit to the changing room to retrieve her cellphone and purse at least—Now that she thought about it, she should have took that opportunity to get changed as well.

"Excuse me~ Please allow me to ask in fear and trepidation, why do you have a key to this place~?"

"Because this is also the clubroom of the chemistry club."

Chihaya slipped inside and closed the door. Before their eyes was a room roughly half the size of an ordinary classroom, with a distinct odor hanging in the air. Inside was a large table used for experiments, locked chemical storage cabinets, as well as a massive cabinet filled with things like molecular models and reference books. It looked like one of the walls in the room had been converted entirely into that massive cabinet.

Isuzu tilted her head slightly.

"But Chihaya-sama, you are not a chemistry club member, are you?"

"I don't recall myself joining any club at all."

Chihaya played with her key holder while walking towards the large cabinet. To be frank, she could also open the locked chemical storage cabinets if she wanted to. There was a spare key on her key holder for that—Naturally, unbeknownst to the chemistry teacher in charge of chemical storage. However, there was no need for her to use it right now.

Because the substances in chemical storage were only needed to *prepare these preparations*. But she had already finished that stage.

"The chemistry club only consists of two cowardly boys."

"Oh..."

"After I threatened them in full force, they became totally obedient."

"..."

Isuzu maintained her pleasant smile as usual with a stiff expression, as well as what seemed to be a drop of cold sweat.

"Speak if you want to say something. I'll hurt you!"

"Oh dear, you're already hurting me~ Uh, I have already understood in various ways, so there is nothing I wish to say~"

After a forceful twist, Chihaya finally released Isuzu's cheek from her fingers. Then she knelt down before the giant metal cabinet, the most striking presence in the room. The lowest part of the cabinet had a cupboard design, which was locked as well. *More precisely, it was locked by her.*

Through spare keys, she had simply made effective use of this location where nothing important was kept—in other words, excess space the teacher had not been using. Furthermore, she had inobtrusively added a second lock, hence there was no problem even if the teacher were to try opening this part on whim some day. She had also commanded... threatened... or rather, trained(?) those chemistry club members, equivalent to lackeys, to tell the teacher: "We totally have no idea there was a second lock. Of course, we don't have a key for something that was

locked to begin with." In any case, the teacher probably was not going to insist on opening it even at the cost of breaking the lock.

Chihaya opened the two locks in sequence and reached into the cupboard.

Then she suddenly looked back at Isuzu.

"Say... Do you really understand just by listening to what I said?"

"Yes," answered Isuzu with a nod and her usual cordial smile.

"This is the 'in case of emergency' of legend, isn't it~?"

Chihaya frowned. Not because Isuzu's reply was too ludicrous, but because she was right. This slave was the same as always, unusually sharp in strange areas. After listening to this remark that seemed to expose her completely, Chihaya felt infuriated and reminded herself to give Isuzu pain later.

"...That's right, this is in case of emergency."

Chihaya sighed while sliding the cupboard open.

She expected Isuzu to be familiar already with the sight of the contents.

Because at least in vibes, this was almost the same as her own bedroom.

Handmade metal cans, bundles of wires, piles of plastic parts, etc. In addition—

In case of emergency, a substantial stockpile of her "creations."

Back during her days as a part-time "curse expert," Chihaya had gathered a lot of underground knowledge for self-defense to make all kinds of tools. Using that knowledge again, she had stolen chemicals and materials from the chemistry club bit by bit to process here.

"I see now... Speaking of which, Chihaya-sama, I often sensed you running to the neighborhood of this room when skipping class or after school. Now it all makes perfect sense~"

"Yeah, it's a perfect way to kill time."

Chihaya narrowed her eyes to look at the items she had made.

In case of emergency.

If anyone asked her "what kind of situation" exactly did emergency refer to—

The answer was determined long ago.

A situation the same as *that* time.

Surfacing in her mind was the image of the first friend she had made after enrolling in this school. The friend who would never exist again. Tall, boisterous, talkative and a bit of an eyesore, but she also left a deep impression on others.

The sudden arrival of abnormal days. The tyrannical events that had attacked the school. Chihaya had been left behind. Under completely bewildering conditions, everything had ended by the time she came to her senses.

Never again—She did not want to experience that sense of helplessness again.

Chihaya bit her lip lightly and tossed these thoughts away.

"Isuzu, a schoolbag is over there, right? Bring it over."

"Yes~"

Together with Isuzu, Chihaya kept stuffing the tools that had been kept here into the schoolbag. As a safeguard against any kind of situation, she had made made plenty, in quantity at least... Since the schoolbag was filled, she grabbed a second one. She hoped that these numbers would be sufficient.

While working continuously on this task of packing, Isuzu chuckled in her throat as though she suddenly thought of something.

"What's wrong?"

"No... Although it is under such circumstances, Chihaya-sama, it feels quite elating as soon as it occurred to me how your silent labors are finally bearing fruit~ Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, Chihaya-sama, your perseverance and dedication ought to be commended by even more people—Owww."

Thinking this was an excellent chance, Chihaya decided to bring on the pain, together with what was owed earlier.

Part 5

Then finally—

It was time to start the operation.

While traveling to the destination, Haruaki recalled the information that had been received during the strategy conference so far.

The Lead Auxiliary, Taciturn Chatterbox, possessed the cursed megaphone, the «Demon's Mouth», which was precisely the tool used to hypnotize the students. Just by listening to words spoken through that megaphone, one would be subjected to brainwashing and hypnosis effects. However, it was also possible to resist through personal strength of will.

Reportedly, this hypnosis effect would slowly weaken over time, but it was not going to release naturally, at least not before "Dominionization" finished, hence waiting for it to pass was not an option. Amanda had said that the most concrete solution to free the students would be to locate Taciturn Chatterbox outside the school so as to seize and destroy the «Demon's Mouth». But the hypnosis would most likely be lifted during the instant of the Wathe's destruction, hence further consideration was still needed to decide the actual moment. They must prevent the students from entering a state of uncontrollable chaos.

"By the way, why is she outside the school in the first place?"

Haruaki had asked a simple question.

"Because the «Demon's Mouth»'s curse, causes the user to be affected as well, if they hear the hypnotic suggestion. Hence she, stuffed the megaphone's speaker with soundproof material."

"Huh? Then no sound is transmitted?"

"Inside the speaker, a mic-like device is installed. Picked up by that device, the sound is emitted from another small speaker in her possession. Then the small speaker, is placed where the hypnosis targets are present, while she issues hypnosis orders from far away out of hearing range, I guess, this is the basic operation."

"So to avoid the curse, she has to minimize hearing her own voice as much as possible? Then leaving that small speaker in the broadcasting room—indeed, probably leaving it in the hands of a certain subordinate—She then issues orders from outside the school, indirectly through the school's public announcement system. Yes~ The knowns have increased."

After Pakuaki summed things up, Konoha threw a glance at him and said:

"...Then the remaining issue is her actual whereabouts, isn't it? Amanda-san, do you have any idea?"

"No, I don't have definite evidence. But, there are hints."

Next, Amanda provided three crucial pieces of information.

"One, the distance issue. If too far away, the «Demon's Mouth»'s long-distance speaker system, cannot produce cursed effect either. I remember, limit is 500m roughly. So she must be, near the school."

"Yes, indeed... Were there no limit, like a telephone, and any system could be used to transmit sound through a speaker without any concern for distance, that would mean one could freely control others, even from the other side of the

globe? That would be far too absolutely ridiculous. This sort of restriction is only natural at least."

Amanda nodded after listening to Kirika and said:

"Second is personality issue. Taciturn Chatterbox—when executing the Dominion Lord's orders—is a perfectionist. She will make perfect preparations, prepare a perfect environment, to achieve a perfect result, so as to respond to the Lord's expectations. Also, the «Demon's Mouth» has another characteristic. Basically... when the user is applying hypnosis, the more noise in the surroundings, the worse the effect and the more likely the targets might resist. So—"

Haruaki gasped in sudden realization.

"She will be somewhere quiet without random noise...?"

Pakuaki also giggled and said:

"Haha, I see. As a perfectionist, she will definitely minimize chances of failure as much as possible. In a noisy country like Japan, quiet places are limited. Adding the restriction that it has to be near the school—"

"It's possible to guess locations. Basements, top floors in high-rise buildings, as well as—places with soundproof facilities? Since it's related to the town, Gab-chan is the one to ask."

'I'll send someone to investigate immediately. Zenon-kun.'

'Understood. Please give me some time.'

Voices could be heard from the computer.

Thanks to Amanda, they were now starting to see the path ahead of them.

Haruaki exhaled in relief and smiled at Amanda.

"Thank you. You really helped us a lot... Looks like we'll find a way to get out of our predicament."

Smiling alone was not enough. Haruaki also patted her on the head.

Her cheeks reddened somewhat.

"Coincidence."

"What coincidence?"

"After Knights Dominion, protected me, I became auxiliary, Taciturn happened to have nothing to do, served as my instructor."

"Oh... So that's why you know so much inside information? Everything was thanks to your coincidence. Oh, but—uh, were you... close...?"

For Amanda, Taciturn might have been a colleague or a boss. Just as Haruaki hoped that she would not feel sad about what was going to happen next—

Amanda narrowed her eyes.

"Opposite."

"Opposite?"

"Taciturn, in matters unrelated to the Dominion Lord, is a hedonist. That's why I, became her toy—"

Seeing her show a sad expression for an instant, Haruaki shook his palm and ruffled Amanda's white hair.

Her hair tousled, Amanda looked up at him with a blank expression.

Haruaki's lips grinned as he said to her:

"Now there's one more reason why she must be defeated no matter what."

Roughly two hours passed after this conversation.

Before their eyes was where Zenon's investigation had determined as the most likely place to find Taciturn—namely, a mixed tenant building near the school. Haruaki and company were standing in front of the building.

Looking up at the window of the targeted floor, Haruaki muttered:

"...Will she be here?"

"It would be troubling if she were not."

"Yeah," said Haruaki as he nodded to Konoha. No matter what, they were not going to stop advancing here. What needed to be done was mostly decided already.

The final target was destroying «Dieu le veut» inside the school. To do that, they absolutely must *release the hypnosis on the student hostages* and *eliminate the barbed wire preventing them from invading the school*. The former had to be undertaken by Haruaki's team because Taciturn, the owner of the «Demon's Mouth», was outside of school. On the other hand, the cursed barbed wire «Auschwitz-Birkenau» could only be damaged from within, hence the latter could only be entrusted to Un Izoey's team who were confined inside the school. This division of labor was naturally decided.

Barging into school would only give the enemy cause to exploit the hostages, hence, as a matter of sequence, the hostages must be liberated first, but it would lead to many problems if the hypnosis were to be released while the students were still completely isolated from the outside world. As soon as they were suddenly jolted back to reality and discovered they were unable to leave the school, they could very well enter a state of chaos. In other words, even if destroying the «Demon's Mouth» could lift the hypnosis, the ideal outcome desired by Haruaki's group at the current juncture was *taking the «Demon's Mouth» from Taciturn's hands, thereby allowing them to cancel the hypnosis any time*. That being said, if this outcome could not be achieved when time came, they would just have to break the «Demon's Mouth» directly instead.

In the end, if the safety of the students was top priority...

In order to fully resolve the two problems, within and outside the school, both had to be undertaken simultaneously as much as possible.

They initially agreed on a time that they had to steal the «Demon's Mouth» before then. The in-school team would take action according to the predetermined schedule and destroy «Auschwitz-Birkenau». Then Haruaki's group would immediately storm the school while breaking the «Demon's Mouth» at the same time to dispel the hypnosis on the students, allowing them to leave the school—That was the specifics of the operation.

They had already decided with the in-school team on the time to start executing the operation.

Matters of consideration included the preparation time required by the in-school team to destroy «Auschwitz-Birkenau», the time needed by Haruaki's team to locate Taciturn and actually storming the place, as well as what needed to be done after that operation was accomplished successfully. Namely, the time needed to enter the school and destroy the spear in the school yard, plus the approximate deadline of 2pm. Taking into account all factors and putting in a buffer period to handle various unexpected situations, the deduced conclusion was—

The operation was set to start at noon today.

It was currently around ten in the morning. No matter how accessible the town's inside information was to the superintendent or how superior Zenon's information processing capabilities, they could not possibly know every corner of this town. They had to spend a lot of time in order to rule out Taciturn's possible hiding places—but precisely because of who they were, it only took as little as this amount of time. Haruaki did not think that anyone else could have filtered the results down in such short time. Let alone complain, he could only feel gratitude towards the superintendent and Zenon.

Haruaki's group was currently doing what was in their power. This included the usual members: Haruaki, Konoha, Kirika, Kotetsu, and Kuroe who had met up with them—as well as Fear.

As a side note, everyone was dressed in school uniform apart from Kotetsu and Kuroe. Since they must head to school once it became time for the operation to start, it would be less of a hassle if they wore school uniform to begin with. Although there was probably no need to care about attire at all right now, but seeing as they were going to school, being in uniform was only natural. There was the feeling that adhering to this rule would be akin to evidence that the school still remained a place where they belonged.

"Let's go."

Fear spoke while looking ahead, without her usual Rubik's cube in her hand. Haruaki guessed that she had entrusted them to Konoha for the time being.

Conversely, she clenched her fist that now stood as her only weapon. With her back completely straight, without the slightest faltering in her eyes, she was very calm and collected—That was what Haruaki could see.

"I'll focus on defense, so Cow Tits, you guys take care of offense."

"You don't need to tell me that."

Taking point, Konoha tiptoed up the stairs to their destination, the entire fourth floor that was being used as a *ballroom dance studio*. This place had excellent soundproofing and seemed a best fit for the requirement of being near the school.

No more hesitation. Considering the scheduled tasks, they must incapacitate Taciturn at least before the in-school team starts their operation at noon. If this location proved to be a dud, that could not be helped and they would simply have to rush to the next candidates.

Haruaki and company looked at one another quietly and nodded. Then Konoha broke the entrance's lock and quietly slipped inside. There was no one in the

narrow space that looked like the lobby. It was quiet all around. Then they found a heavy door with a massive door handle.

Confirming one another's opinion by exchanging glances again, they opened the door and entered. This seemed to be a place for many people to gather and practice dancing. A wide open space roughly the size of a classroom. One entire wall was made into a mirror to allow dancers to examine their own movements.

Then—There were two things that were exactly as expected, in a certain sense.

"Heeheehee, welcome. Although there is nothing here, please relax and take a good break."

The first prediction coming true was good news, namely, the woman described by Amanda was present in the classroom.

The second was one that could not be helped—namely, there were five or six knights standing around the woman.

"If only you were alone... But of course, developments are not going to unfold so smoothly."

Konoha grumbled with a frown then lowered her stance in preparation for combat.

In contrast, the flamboyantly dressed woman, Taciturn Chatterbox, simply curled her lips in a smile. Without moving, she remained sitting on a railing-like metal bar on the wall.

"Because Dainsleif already reported the stupid news to me that the idiot Coenraad had his communication device stolen, it's obviously conceivable that someone might attack me outside if you people were able to make contact as a result... Hence, I called for bodyguards."

"Hmph... I can't believe you are still so complacent and chose not to run. That being said, we do count our blessings that there is no need to waste time anymore."

"Indeed, because there's no guarantee that this place would be found for sure. Whether being discovered here or escaping to another noise-less place to be discovered by you people, chances are the same. All along, my mission is to execute the Lord's orders, to allow myself to issue additional hypnotic suggests any time, rather than arbitrarily running all over the place."

The woman was wearing stockings that were mismatched between left and right, a jacket with too many decorations, and gaudy clothing in vivid colors. Combined with a pointed hat reminiscent of a witch's, she looked somewhat like a clown.

Held in her right hand was a certain cone-shaped object, pointed downwards and swinging back and forth.

(That's the...!)

It was most likely the cursed megaphone «Demon's Mouth». It was one or two sizes larger than the megaphones one would normally see. Yellowed and decrepit, its coloration looked quite aged. Its major characteristic was that the cone's opening was covered up with a lid. This was to prevent the fact that even the user would be affected by its cursed power if the emitted sound was heard directly. After picking up the sound, the microphone inside the lid would transmit it to a small output speaker that was presumably kept in the school's broadcasting room right now, thereby issuing loathsome hypnotic suggestions to the students through the microphone of the school's public announcement system—

She must be stopped. Now that they had appeared before the enemy, they must not retreat at any cost. Given an opening in this situation, she could very well seize the chance to issue fatal orders to all the students in the school.

Hence, Konoha did not hesitate at all.

Without wasting further breath on words, she stepped forward as a sharp blade in human form. At the same time, Kotetsu dashed forward. Kuroe also extended hardened hair towards the «Demon's Mouth» in Taciturn's hand.

"Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

"Oh dear, you guys have to protect me properly."

Taciturn jumped down from the metal railing. The knights shielded her behind them and used their swords to intercept Kuroe's hair.

"Very well, you shall work as hard as you can! Knights, our victory condition is exceedingly simple, namely, the «Demon's Mouth» must be thoroughly protected—However, with risk comes opportunity. If you succeed in killing them here, the mission in this country could be considered essentially accomplished. I will certify you with perfect A as a present. Naturally, our Lord will also be delighted!"

Hearing her, the rest of the knights also drew their swords with a roar, stepping forward to engage Konoha and Kotetsu in battle.

"Haruaki, Kirika, you two fall back."

"O-Okay."

"...Understood."

Fear took a step forward to protect Haruaki and Kirika. But that was all. Clenching her fist, she stared intently at Konoha and Kotetsu's intense fight. If any knight were to rush out from between them, Fear probably intended to fight with her fists.

Compared to holding a drill in her tiny hand while attacking the knights proactively, which would be better? To be frank, Haruaki was not sure either. However, at least this was better than her transforming into a cube, giving off vibes of weakness and unease that did not suit her, trembling nonstop.

"By the way... Ooh~ Wah~ Another one got taken out. Seriously, it's gotten to the point where I wonder how meaningful my encouragements just now were. How odd~ There shouldn't be much time left before 'Dominionization' is completed, so you guys ought to be more durable and resilient than normal instead. How useless, show some more spirit, will you?"

"Speaking of spirit—We are not going to lose to you people!"

"No matter how much power they receive, small fries remain as small fries!"

Konoha and Kotetsu sent their respective opponent flying. By the time Haruaki noticed, the knights in charge of protecting Taciturn had been greatly thinned in number, leaving only one person standing—The remainder were either collapsed unconscious or sprawled on the floor, groaning.

Kuroe persisted in extending her hair towards Taciturn. Although the «Demon's Mouth» could not be snatched away so easily, at least this achieved the effect of containment.

Taciturn loaded the «Demon's Mouth» onto her shoulder then turned her neck as though going "oh dear oh dear."

"Ah~ Now this is bad. As expected of loathsome, filthy and nauseating Wathes. How strong, how strong. There seems to be no chance of victory for a mere auxiliary whose sneakiness might count as her only strength and a bunch of knights who only number six people no matter how strengthened their powers~"

Konoha suddenly frowned.

"...What diabolical plan are you coming up with now?"

"No no no, I'm just describing the truth as it is. We cannot win on our own. Hey, you guys—What do you think needs to be done during times like these?"

While blocking Kuroe's hair in front of her, a knight answered without looking back:

"A knight should act like a knight, willing to die for their cause!"

Hearing that, Taciturn grinned.

"Indeed, we are the Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion. Along with our Lord, the mission of gathering and destroying Wathes is everything to us—!"

Then she used the megaphone in her right hand to *strike the wall behind her*.

"What...!?"

Haruaki was rendered speechless. What was she doing? Why do that? An act of surrender? Knowing she was going to lose, was she breaking the Wathe on her own initiative to release the students?

—Of course not. That kind of thing would be impossible.

Struck by the impact against the wall, the lid covering the megaphone cracked and came loose, falling to the floor.

The moment he saw that scene, Haruaki felt an intense chill across his spine. No way—

"You're going to use it!? But you'll be affected too!"

"How knowledgeable you are~ Furthermore, when issuing orders directly without transmitting to a long-distance speaker, the cursed power will increase to an incomparable extent. It's not something that can be resisted with willpower alone."

A compact device resembling a microphone could be seen among the remains of the broken lid on the floor. Presumably loosened from its socket, the microphone's wire was dangling, most likely unable to perform its function of picking up sound anymore. Taciturn was probably no longer able to send the megaphone's sounds to the school.

However, the danger level here was rapidly rising. Kuroe instantly sprang into action.

"...«Penetrator Yoshimasa»!"

"You're not going to succeed!"

The final knight turned himself into a shield to block Kuroe's hair. In addition to deflecting it with his sword, he also used his palm to catch the hair that was

extending like a spear, making the hair pierce the center of his palm on purpose to allow him to ensnare the hair securely. The resulting bright red color made Konoha frown.

"Fufu... Now that direct orders will be given, I can issue hypnotic suggestions that normally do not succeed, i.e. those that threaten the targets' lives directly. What will you do? Would you like mutually assured destruction? By the way, let me tell you that this is a closed space. Whether covering your ears will succeed in blocking out the sound or not, it's something you won't know until you try it."

"...!"

"By the way, let me tell you this, whether Wathes or humans, the effects work on anything that is self-aware. As soon as I order 'die,' even if you turn back into your forms as tools, your consciousness will still die off."

Taciturn's shoulders shook with delight while she spoke:

"Heeheehee, none of you have apparently noticed... This thing has a very high chance of killing anyone, as long as I have no concern for my own life. In other words, this is a Wathe that can achieve mutually assured destruction with almost 100%, you know? What a shame~ So, what will you do? Would you like to die together with me? Or will you choose something else?"

Everyone stopped moving. Both sides glared at each other. Taciturn was serious. She was already prepared to die for the Knights Dominion's cause, even to the point of bringing Haruaki's group down in mutual destruction. What to do? They must not let her escape now, but they must not die with her either. What to do—

Konoha was the first to take action. She suddenly turned her head back and yelled:

"Haruaki-kun! Hurry and cover your ears—"

"—**Hört!!**"

Hence, Taciturn reacted and instantly raised the megaphone to her lips to shout.

A hoarse and grainy voice came out of the megaphone. One could sense the surrounding air instantly fill up with a cursed presence.

According to Un Izoey, this was the keyword uttered prior to issuing hypnotic suggestions. As soon as the one listened to the next words—

Once she said the word "die"—Their entire group was going to do so together with her—

But these thoughts only lingered in his mind for an instant.

"Haruaki!"

Fear and Konoha both collided into him, pushing him down on the ground. Both of them even reached out gruffly to cover his ears up with their hands. Idiots! Then you two will—! As soon as Haruaki looked up, he saw Kuroe's hair cover up Fear, Konoha and Kotetsu's ears like earmuffs.

But during her efforts to protect everyone, Kuroe's face suddenly turned to alarm as she watched a certain scene.

Haruaki also followed her gaze—He then understood why she was making such a face.

There were two reasons.

One, Taciturn was running towards the exit as fast as she could.

Two—Without covering her ears at all, going so far as to brush away Kuroe's hair that intended to protect her ears like with Fear and the others, Kirika was chasing after Taciturn.

Haruaki's entire body froze as he yelled:

"No, Class Rep—!"

But he had no way of knowing whether he was actually shouting loudly or that his voice was reaching her ears or not.

(Tsk... What imbeciles. I was giving you a chance to escape.)

Taciturn clicked her tongue mentally.

Just as mentioned earlier, their victory condition was thorough protection of the «Demon's Mouth». Indeed, killing Yachi Haruaki's group here would be a perfect Grade A outcome, but there was no need to obsess over this result. Despite the many losses incurred, the option of escaping also had sufficient value to be certified Grade B.

Hence, if there was a chance to escape, fleeing the place ought to be prioritized over killing them—That was what Taciturn originally concluded.

If the enemy tried to obstruct her escape, then she had no choice but to use hypnotic suggestions. The hypnosis would definitely work 100% on that reckless girl who was trying to block her way, right? As for Haruaki and the others who had their ears covered, there was probably a 70% probability of success.

Under such conditions, the hypnotic suggestion could not be too long. Ambiguous and complicated suggestions were also unsuitable. She could only use an exceedingly simple sentence. Ultimately—She had no choice.

Indeed, her victory condition was to protect the «Demon's Mouth» thoroughly—
Not *protecting Taciturn Chatterbox thoroughly*.

(Yes. However, if they were to capture me then destroy this Wathe, there would be absolutely no benefit to me~ I must prevent this Grade D outcome at any cost. This would be best in the Lord's interests.)

Hence, in the end, for the sake of a Grade C outcome, the lowest tolerable...

Taciturn opted for mutual annihilation as she had threatened earlier. It was definitely going to work on the unguarded girl before her and would eliminate a

number of these troublesome characters with extremely high probability. Not a pointless course of action, probably.

Taciturn calmly raised the «Demon's Mouth» to her lips and ordered:

"Everyone listening, commit suicide immediately."

The job of auxiliaries included gathering information. Hence, Taciturn recognized the girl before her. Ueno Kirika, Yamimagari Pakuaki's younger sister, the wearer of the cursed bondage suit «Gimestorante's Love» which conferred the cursed power of immortality.

Facing those released cursed words, even that cursed power of immortality and its ilk would be meaningless.

Because this hypnotic suggestion would compel her to die by her own volition—Her only way of freeing herself from that cursed power of immortality was presumably removing «Gimestorante's Love» then dying.

In fact, Taciturn could see the girl, who was blocking her path, reach for her own sleeve.

At the same time, Taciturn could feel her own tongue starting to tremble like mad. An irrepressible urge—loathsome and filthy—an urge known as a curse. Immediately, her front teeth moved autonomously to bite her own tongue. Then came excruciating pain. The stench of blood began to spread inside her mouth. Biting one's own tongue was extraordinarily impractical as a method of suicide, but without proper and timely treatment, it would still lead to death. Dying for the Lord, she felt rather honored, except for the displeasing fact that the process involved a loathsome curse.

The intense pain was sharpening her five senses and time felt like it was moving exceedingly slowly. From the corner of her eye, she saw one of the knights whose legs had been broken by Kotetsu. Raising the sword in his hand, he stabbed himself in the chest. No one was spared once they heard the hypnotic suggestion.

Then—The girl in front of her.

She rolled her sleeve up to her elbow.

And stopped there.

She did not undress any further. After merely rolling her sleeve, she stopped her action.

(What...!?)

With fierce determination in her eyes, she stared straight at Taciturn.

She was not hypnotized.

Taciturn was greatly shocked.

Why? How could she possibly have resisted? This was a closed space surrounded by soundproof walls. At extremely close range, a hypnotic suggestion issued at maximum strength without transmitting through a speaker. How could she possibly have defied the suicide command—?

"Sorry, I can't hear what you're saying."

The girl said with a solemn expression.

At the same time, she pointed lightly at her ear.

"I was thinking you might try to use hypnosis, so just now—while you were breaking the lid—I damaged my eardrums first."

No way! Just a second after Taciturn stopped moving—

A certain object pried her lips open and entered her mouth, wrapping around her tongue.

"Let's see... Is this how it's used?"

As soon as she heard the girl speaking softly, her tongue transmitted the sensation of intense pain, intense pain, intense intense intense pain. The cloth-like object

wrapped around her tongue—It was absorbing her blood. That kind of pain was difficult to articulate.

"Gah, ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Confronted with this slow torture of pain that would drive one insane...

Unable to withstand it any longer, Taciturn fainted.

While Haruaki was staring in shock, Kirika picked up the «Demon's Mouth» that had fallen from Taciturn's hand.

Glancing at the knights who were stabbing themselves with weapons or committing suicide by biting their tongues like Taciturn, she directed her lips to the «Demon's Mouth» and called out:

"—**Hört!!** Stop committing suicide!"

Outside his covered ears, Haruaki could sense a grim reaper's presence deliberating ominously whether to enter his body or not, riding upon Taciturn's voice to approach discreetly—It instantly drifted away as a result of Kirika's command.

Seeing the knights release their weapons and collapse on the floor, Kirika said:

"So that's how it works, I see... To use it any further would be absolutely ridiculous. I am not obliged to force myself to help you people either."

Then Kirika looked towards Haruaki and the others and nodded as though saying "Are you okay?"

Haruaki looked at her right arm. Wrapped around her right wrist, also twisting like a snake and wrapped around Taciturn's tongue, the ribbon-like object was not the «Tragic Black River» that had been taken away by the enemy.

Instead, it was the cursed bandage that used to belong to Amanda.

"Oh... This is «Chupacabra Bandage», a bandage that is able to heal wounds while absorbing blood and inflicting intense pain. When Amanda came under the protection of Himura—the Lab Chief's Nation—this thing presumably came under their safekeeping too. That being said, I've no idea why Pakuaki handed this thing over to me, how absolutely ridiculous..."

While listening to Kirika murmur as though talking to herself, Haruaki gulped.

Indeed, he did have many questions about that bandage. However, there were more important matters at the moment. Haruaki stood up.

"D-Don't be so reckless! Class Rep, what the heck were you thinking?"

Then he approached Kirika. He really thought his heart was going to stop just now. What happened next was not something he could accept. Even with his ears covered, he could understand everything simply from Kirika's gestures just now. To think she damaged her own eardrums, she must have used Kuroe's hardened hair that had been severed by the enemy.

After Haruaki strode over to her, Kirika frowned and said:

"...Sorry. I can't hear anything, but I think it'll heal up very soon."

Seeing her troubled expression, Haruaki sighed.

Kirika's face looked like a child who knew she was about to be scolded by her parents.

Since she was unable to hear, I'll do this at least—Hence, Haruaki definitely acted as though he were scolding a child, making a fist to give Kirika's head a light knock. Then—

"Ah..."

Clearly, he was angry.

But for some reason, Kirika relaxed her expression and made a demure and happy smile.

Part 6

The cursed barb wire—«Auschwitz-Birkenau». Once encircled by this Wathe, an area would become impossible to enter or exit. Although the effects were apparently not forever, they were most likely going to persist at least until «Dieu le veut» finished "Dominionization." It would be pointless to wait for it to lose effect naturally.

The only solution was to neutralize the Wathe from within, by taking down the encircling barbed wire. But in practice, the Knights Dominion would likely have sent a sizable force to defend the barbed wire. Since they had discovered that Un Izoey's group had not been hypnotized and had remained in school as well, this was only natural.

'My question: if severed instead of taken down, how about this suggestion? If severing, can be done instantly.'

"...Probably, doable. But, «Auschwitz-Birkenau» has self-repair abilities. For example, if severed in one place only, it won't work, will reconnect immediately. Several, dozens of places, must be severed at the same time."

"The result remains still the same. Under the knights' surveillance, cutting the wire all over the place would seem to be very challenging."

While Pakuaki remarked with a shrug of his shoulders, the voice coming from the cellphone's speaker phone changed.

'But action can only be taken by us who are inside the school. We will find a way.'

The voice continued in a sulking tone:

'Because I really want to change out of these gym clothes as quickly as possible.'

—Right now, Chihaya was holding up her cellphone to confirm the time.

"It's almost time."

The agreed time to start the operation, noon, would arrive soon. In other words, there were still two hours and a bit before the deadline of 2pm. This schedule was chosen in consideration of the time required *beforehand* for prior preparations as well as the time needed *afterwards* for storming the school and destroying the spear—A decision reached by combining these two factors, hence there was not a lot of buffer time. There were no second chances.

However, the team outside of school had just contacted them to report the success of external operation. Although the period of preparation time gave the team outside of school substantial leeway, time was tight for the in-school team. They were still preparing until just earlier.

There was no time to take a breather either. The final task was just about to begin.

"So, we have to do our best for the next part!"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, good luck~"

"My warning: please do not get careless."

Led by Un Izoey, the group gathered at the secret room's exit to standby. It would be a race against time as soon as things started, hence they could no longer hide here.

Chihaya looked down at her cellphone again...

The LCD proudly showed a perfectly round number—

Finally, it was time to begin the operation.

Just at this moment, Chihaya and the others heard a number of noises in the distance.

The sound of certain objects exploding, as well as the screams of students.

At the same time, the fire alarm began to ring noisily.

Chihaya and company rushed out of the secret room all at once.

Instantly, as one would expect, the knights also noticed the unusual situation.

All over the school, there were explosion sounds and the nonstop fire alarm.

Present in the sports ground, Dainsleif rushed out of the main tent and looked in all directions.

Looking in the direction of the school building, she saw a large amount of white smoke emerging from the windows. Not only that, but clouds of white smoke were rising outside the school building too, such as the bushes next to the building, the roots of decorative plants and near the garbage dump.

Narrowing her eyes behind the helmet, Sleif gritted her teeth and murmured:

"Explosions—?"

Part 7

However, those were not explosives.

What Chihaya had prepared were simply timer-operated smoke grenades. While making large noises, they did not cause explosions.

"Mmmfufu, don't look down on the commoners~"

"To hide trees, use a forest! Our commoner-ness really can't be underestimated!"

The task of mixing among the students, placing smoke grenades in various places inside the school, was mainly undertaken by Kana and Taizou along with the disguised Shiraho. However, Chihaya still had to help by setting up the smoke grenades in the bushes outside the school building, pretending to be returning to the classroom after PE lesson. Reluctantly leaving her shovel in the secret room, Kaidou the teacher also helped by setting up smoke grenades in places where students would look out of place as soon as they entered.

In response to this extraordinary commotion, the students in class all rushed out of the classrooms. The corridors instantly turned into noise and chaos. Although the students were hypnotized not to see the knights, they could not possibly ignore this kind of simple disturbance.

"What's going on?" "What's going on?" Chihaya and company weaved through the noisy students and ran. Just as they had planned, the school building was filled with white smoke. However, this was harmless to human health, a simple diversion.

"Is it a fire!?"

"Possibly an enemy attack! Stay vigilant!"

They could also see knights standing in the connecting corridor, surveying their surroundings, shouting to one another. Just as they had predicted and going according to plan, the enemy's attention was entirely diverted to this commotion—because they were taking things seriously, they had no choice but to handle matters seriously.

Ignoring the knights, the in-school team pretended to be fleeing students scared by the smoke, running inside the school building. Following the staircase, they ran up and reached the roof. The instant they opened the metal door at the top of the staircase, a knight entered their view, presumably in charge of guarding the roof.

"What!? Who are you people—Gwah!"

However, Un Izoey dashed forward without a word and swiftly rendered him helplessly collapsed. A perfect surprise attack, what a great help.

Then the team walked over to the fencing and looked down at the school grounds.

The knights' gazes were directed towards the school building while they hustled back and forth. Their attention was focused on the white smoke—*Conversely, this meant that their attention had been diverted from a certain place.*

In order to destroy the self-regenerating «Auschwitz-Birkenau», they had to damage the barb wire in dozens of different places at once while staying clear of the knights. This was the plan they had come up with to achieve this goal.

"Excellent! Let's do it with great gusto—!"

"Please allow me to say in fear and trepidation, the spectacular show has finally arrived~"

Sovereignty and Isuzu were standing precariously on the fencing with a large schoolbag prepared on the side.

"Do your best, Sovereignty."

"You can count on me—!"

Hearing Shiraho cheer for her, Sovereignty made a thumbs-up in return then reached into the schoolbag to take out a doll. This was borrowed by slipping into the dressmaking room. Tied tightly to the doll's arm was a pair of scissors that was likewise found in the dressmaking room.

"I hold sovereignty over every doll. Those bearing visual semblance, listen and show proof of your worship. Obey!"

"Wow, it's starting~"

"Hold it right there, let me help too. No matter how I look, I'm on the baseball team after all... And as catcher too, I'm very confident in my throwing skills!"

Taizou picked up the doll, rotated his shoulder several times, then launched the doll after a long running start. The doll struck the outer wall surrounding the school and fell down. However, the doll instantly got up and using the pair of scissors tied to it, it started to cut the barbed wire that was entwined on the wall. However, cutting a wire was not as easy as cutting paper. It took quite some time before the wire was finally severed.

Having lost tension, the wire would be expected to fall down there—However, the severed ends began to move like nematode worms, writhing in a creepy manner. The regeneration ability of rumor. However, the rate of regeneration was not so fast that the severed ends would rise up and reconnect within the blink of an eye... Hence, to render the entire wire completely non-functional, they must hurry and repeat the same action in other locations before the severed ends reattached themselves.

And that creepy regeneration could probably be used to determine whether their plan had succeeded or not. If dozens of simultaneous cuts damaged «Auschwitz-Birkenau» beyond its limit, truly "killing" it, the self-regeneration ability would presumably die as well. In other words, once the barbed wire stopped regenerating, when no part of it showed any regeneration movements, they could then conclude that «Auschwitz-Birkenau»'s destruction had succeeded. What they sought was that moment.

"Great~ Let's continue! Charge—!"

"Leave it to me!"

"Well then, we shall put on a grand performance too~"

After Isuzu spoke, certain objects hovered around her as though surrounding her neck.

Fourteen bells.

Like the doll earlier, all the bells had scissors tied to them.

"Move out, everyone!"

The bells flew away in all directions while Isuzu commanded.

Like the doll, the bells collided with the school's boundary walls. One of them fell into the bushes directly below. As soon as the bushes rustled, out emerged a girl identical in appearance to Isuzu on the roof. Despite being completely naked, the girl remained unconcerned and started using the pair of scissors tied to her little

finger to cut the barbed wire—So did the other bells. They were the kagura bells who existed as one set of fifteen.

Nevertheless, the knights could not possibly fail to notice these movements despite their focused attention on the school building.

"Hey! What are you doing!?"

"..."

Apart from Isuzu who was borrowing half of Chihaya's voice, the silent kagura bells were unable to speak. The questioned bell only worked faster with an alarmed expression.

Chihaya silently searched the schoolbag and took out an object, shoving it to Taizou.

"Hurry and throw this over there!"

"O-Okay!"

A spare smoke grenade, but instead of being timer-operated, it was switch-operated. The smoke grenade thrown by Taizou fell in front of the knight who was just about to run towards one of the kagura bells, causing white smoke to billow upwards—It should be able to buy a bit of time.



"My dolls are replaceable, so it doesn't matter, but the bells shouldn't strain themselves!"

"Yes, I will pull them back if things get truly dangerous. Please don't worry~"

Severing complete. Seeing the knight rush over, Isuzu turned her back into a bell and performed a motion akin to tugging a rope, causing her to fly back to the roof. Then she pulled another bell back. This bell had not succeeded in cutting the wire. Caught on the barbed wire, the pair of scissors was swaying back and forth.

"Wah~ They broke that doll!"

"Hurry and throw the replacement doll! Let it cut the wire!"

"Wait, Toonisuzu has been discovered! Hurry and cover her!"

"I shall do it since that is within my throwing range. Give it to me!"

Kaidou also joined in the smoke grenade throwing to provide cover. Several knights could be seen below, pointing at the roof and shouting. They were discovered. Quickening their pace was imperative.

Using the timer-operated smoke grenades as a diversion while Sovereignty's dolls and Isuzu's bells worked separately during this time—This plan was theoretically feasible. If they made use of all available manpower to cut the barbed wire, even if they failed in several locations, in the end, they still ought to be able to inflict enough damage to destroy «Auschwitz-Birkenau»—

That was what those present believed.

Meanwhile, the team outside the school was standing before the gates, waiting anxiously for the moment to arrive. The mission must not fail. Since there were no second chances and it was unknown when the knights outside would show up at the gates, the school must be liberated as soon as possible—

(...I couldn't care less whether they believe or not.)

Chihaya bit her lip.

(My pride won't permit failure after I accepted this mission with full confidence, saying I will find a way. Or having made preparations for times like these, only to be useless after all...!)

Not yet? Still not yet? Chihaya looked down at scene below with a pleading mindset, staring at the wires that were starting to wriggle after being severed. Hurry and stop them from regenerating! Hurry and destroy them!

Some of the kagura bells had completed their task successfully. Other kagura bells were cornered by the knights and returned to Isuzu's side one after another. As the main entity of the kagura bells at the moment, Isuzu was unable to leave. Worried and anxious, she watched her alter egos.

Kana checked the situation busily and said:

"Quite a few spots have been cut...! Still not enough!?"

"It should be almost done...!"

Chihaya glanced at Shiraho. In a connected call with the team outside the school, she had the cellphone pressed against her ear. Returning Chihaya's gaze, she moved the receiver away slightly and shook her head:

"Not yet, apparently. They are shouting and screaming like monkeys, saying they can't get in."

Just a little more. Definitely, just a bit more—

However, wails were heard at this time.

"Hey! We're out of smoke grenades!"

"In other words... Ah~ The final doll has been—! Sorry, I can't carry on anymore!"

"Can we send the returned shrine maidens out again?"

"We could, if they severed the wire successfully and returned with their scissors. But right now, the alert level is truly...!"

The enemy had apparently figured out by now that the white smoke in school were simply diversions on the level of smokes and mirrors, originating from neither fire nor explosions. They could also see that gradually, the knights were no longer losing composure and were beginning to handle the situation at hand calmly. In other words, they had started to focus on protecting «Auschwitz-Birkenau».

In addition, there was one more problem, namely, the barbed wire's self-regeneration ability. Now was no longer the time to confirm the operation's success through the wire's movements. Once too much time had passed, the parts that had been severed successfully earlier would reconnect, rendering prior efforts moot.

"Gah...!"

Chihaya leaned forward in agitation. Currently next to the barb wire encircling the school, trying hard to cut the wire—There was one more kagura bell farthest from the roof, on the far end of the sports ground. Chihaya recognized her, it was Musuzu. Since Musuzu's location was hidden behind the Knights Dominion's tents, right under their noses, she had surprisingly evaded detection so far. At this rate, once that part was cut, surely—

However, Chihaya saw at that moment—

A knight on the sports ground suddenly discovered Musuzu and started to dash towards her at maximum speed. Unlike the other knights, this knight did not seem like someone that could be handled by Musuzu, who could not even chant norito prayers at the moment. A girl wearing a visor-like helmet—

Meanwhile, Haruaki's team was also in great anxiety.

Noon, in front of the school gates. This was the operation start time they had agreed with the in-school team at the end of their strategy conference.

A number of minutes had already passed since noon—

"Still not opening!"

Fear roared and knocked on the school gates with a slam. Konoha shoved Fear way with her shoulder and swung a karate chop, but the metal bars remained unscathed.

Probably drawn away by the commotion inside the school, not a single knight could be seen behind the school gates. Besides, white smoke was rising from all over the school's premises, making for poor visibility. It was impossible to check out the situation inside the school from their vantage point, hence Haruaki's team could only rely on sound.

"They seem to be very preoccupied! Hey!"

Haruaki yelled into the cellphone whose call had persisted for a while now.

'You're unbearably noisy, human. As usual, you are experimenting with audio rape again, testing out which wavelength can cause vibrations in my ear, thus making me pregnant, aren't you? What a nuisance. Let me tell you some good news, if you were to dial 110^[2] before firing off obscene sound waves, I expect something universally beneficial to occur for sure. Putting that aside, are you people still unable to open the gates?'

"That's what I wanted to ask your side!"

There was no time to complain about her usual scathing tongue. Haruaki retorted in a roar and heard a dialogue of "not yet, apparently" in the background. Surely, they must be trying their hardest on the other side too.

When was it going to open? Was it really going to open?

Just at that moment—

'...How troublesome.'

'The final bell was discovered by the enemy. A female knight wearing a strange helmet.'

Haruaki gasped.

"It's over... That's Sleif!"

Dainsleif bit her lip as she dashed forward.

They had fallen for it, diversionary tactics. Back in their home country, attacks would not come as surprise no matter how large in scale, but here in Japan where even firearms could not be carried freely, especially inside a school—How could someone possibly detonate explosions?

However, «Auschwitz-Birkenau» was still intact, its effects had not disappeared. Since it was capable of self-regeneration, it should not be too late to salvage as long as further cuts in the wire were prevented.

"Hence—I shall not allow you—to succeed!"

Behind the tent, the nude girl holding a pair of scissors to cut the wire on the fence—no, a vile Wathe—looked back in alarm. Sleif did not even draw the sword at her waist. After all, it was just an ordinary sword. Right now, she felt as though the act of sword drawing would be a waste of time. She did not want to slow down her running speed even for a millisecond.

If all she wanted was a blade, her own body was enough.

Raising her hand in a spear hand strike, Dainsleif accelerated while maintaining a forward leaning posture. Within a breath, she was going to enter into attack range. Presumably in a last ditch effort, the nude girl hastily worked at cutting the wire. Just as Dainsleif was about stab her hand into the girl's back—

"—!"

She shivered in that instant as a chill ran along her spine. Instinctively, she spun around and chopped with her hand, deflecting the deadly dart aimed at her neck, flying at her helmet gap like a bullet. While catching the dart's glint from the corner of her eye, she glared at the source.

Then with superhuman vision, she caught sight of the dark-skinned girl sitting on the roof fencing, whose leg was extended in her direction.

(From the Lab Chief's Nation... The Hunter!)

But compared to her, the vandal here needed to be taken care of first. Dainsleif gritted her teeth and looked back, only to see—

The pair of scissors falling to the ground with a thud, as well as two dangling ends of barbed wire.

And then there was the small bell crossing over her head, flying towards that roof.

Hatred, fury, chagrin, humiliation.

Driven by these emotions, Dainsleif roared as loud as she could:

"...Curse you all—!"

Instantly, on the roof...

Long before any other sound...

A high-five between a certain pair could be heard loud and clear first—

"Oh."

"Ufufu~ ...Oh, umm, deliberately pretending to make a face that seems to be saying 'I raised my arm intending to do a high-five, got a problem with that?' but immediately switching to an iron-clawed attack to hide your embarrassment,

that's truly your style, Chihaya-sama. How magnificent, but you really need to hold back. Unyoni, it really hurts—"

"H-Hurting you is exactly what I want!"

Next—

Haruaki heard two kinds of sounds at the same time.

One was the sound of Konoha personally bifurcating metal bars with a slice of her hand.

The other was the sound of Fear's punch sending metal bars flying.

Fear turned her head back, causing her silver hair to flutter.

"Opened... It's opened, Haruaki!"

"Great!"

However, he then heard Shiraho sigh deeply from the other side of the phone call.

'Sigh... How regrettable. Truly how regrettable.'

"H-Hey, did something happen?"

Did mutual annihilation happen? Despite destroying the barbed wire successfully, did someone in Isuzu's group fall to Sleif—?

'Looks like my Sovereignty has a chance of making contact with the perverted human again. Until just now, I didn't need to worry about that, at least. Listen carefully, if you dare hug Sovereignty, I will kill you.'

"...Huh?"

'Because you are a natural-born pervert, believing single-mindedly that hugging is the first step towards getting someone in bed, also believing single-mindedly

that saying hello is the first step towards penetration, you are mentally removing a girl's panties by the time she crosses your mind. Warning you beforehand is only natural... Oh, stop it! Don't strip Sovereignty's panties!

Haruaki could hear Sovereignty's perplexed voice going 'Eh? Eh?' in the background. Imagining the scene, he made a wry expression.

The operation had gone off without a hitch.

They were finally able to storm the school.

Struck by an excessive sense of relief, Haruaki decided to play a small joke on Shiraho in a rare moment.

"Then I won't hug Sovereignty. I'll hug you instead. Wait for me."

'Eek!' The last thing Haruaki heard before the call disconnected was a truly acute scream that Shiraho had never emitted before. Silently, Haruaki felt rather hurt by the response.

Chapter 5 - The Restless Fear-in-Cube / "Cross x Crusade x Calamitous"

Part 1

These two were watching the same scene.

"Looks like the new battlefield has been built."

Their gazes were directed towards the open school gates, in other words, the place where a certain group had rushed into.

Smiling with delight, Satsuko said:

"Let's go."

"Yes."

Together with Fourteen, she started walking.

The opponent's identity did not matter. Anyone would do as long as they were strong enough.

This was undoubtedly the center where everything was happening. Any opponent encountered there would possess a minimum level of strength. The number of strong opponents here should be too many to count.

"Oh dear~ Satsuko is so looking forward to this."

She murmured with utmost sincerity.

Her heart was overflowing with anticipation.

Sincerely, only anticipation.

Part 2

Maximilian Pendragon had just jumped onto the wall surrounding the school, but stopped there.

"Hey...?"

Riko called out in puzzlement. This was already who knew how many times today.

He was spacing out, pondering what Kuroe had said to him.

(So... What should I do...?)

He came here and saw them rush into the school, which informed him that the school's isolation had ended. Hence, he jumped onto the wall first.

However, he still had no idea.

So, all he could do was think back to what he did know.

At the current stage, what was known to him.

To him, in order to become a dragon, he really needed the girl who was like a treasure.

But if he tried to take her by force, that treasure would become damaged—

So—what about the situation before that happened? So far, what had he come to understand?

He was the strongest. At least, he should be infinitely close to being the strongest existence.

Either way, he was going to win—At some point, he had started to feel weary of this. Because he was the strongest, this was only natural.

There was nothing more boring than a match where it was clear that one was going to win. He had been very bored all along. Searching for an opponent to duel and make him happy, pretending to be dispelling boredom, he had felt bored the whole time.

However, someone like him had reached this kind of result.

Namely, Kuroe had escaped from him successfully.

Then right now, he was savoring this displeased feeling.

Indeed, in a certain sense—this counted as defeat.

Even the strongest person still could lose. There ought to be a reason for that. What was it?

Pendragon thought and thought.

He admitted it.

(Am I... impatient?)

In order to obtain her as quickly as possible. In order to obtain her by any means necessary.

He was desiring too urgently.

However, there was a contradiction in all this.

Clearly as the closest to being the strongest—Why was he so impatient to obtain her, what he needed to progress farther?

(Ha...)

He could not help but smile in self-mockery. There was only one answer.

Because he feared getting judged by others, that despite being called the strongest, he was not actually the strongest.

He wanted to eliminate the possibility of defeat as quickly as possible, the possibility of being not the strongest.

Nothing much, that was it.

Feeling bored? No. Undoubtedly, he was seeking a sense of security. How pointless.

(Hoho, I get it now. Commander of the Draconians? Synonymous to being the strongest? Totally absurd... For someone like that, there are weaknesses exclusive only to someone like that.)

Ultimately, he had become the strongest only because he had defeated the strongest person.

Hence, every so-called Commander understood better than anyone the concept that even if you were the strongest, you would still be dragged down from your throne eventually.

Perhaps this also implied that the Commander was more cowardly than anyone. Perhaps driven to seek a sense of security more than anyone else. Hence, that was why he used boredom as an excuse to fight nonstop.

After admitting this "weakness" of his—

Pendragon thought back to what Kuroe had said.

He recalled that transparent expression on her face back then.

Hence, he felt like he could see something.

He seemed to have found the answer.

"Ho... Ha, hahaha!"

"Uwah! What's going on? You suddenly stopped moving then started to laugh!
It's creepy!"

"Master, what is the matter with you?"

Listening to the voices of the two whom he was wearing, Pendragon grinned.

"Nothing much, I simply figured out what I should be doing. So—that means I have to make preparations now. I've got to hurry and make a move."

Saying that, Pendragon jumped down from the wall.

As for the direction he jumped towards, surely Riko and Granaury would never have guessed in their wildest dreams.

Part 3

After Shiraho hung up, Haruaki dialed his phone again, this time to talk to Kana while he was running.

Because they had entered through the main entrance, the large clock on the front of the school building was in view. The current time was just after noon, in other words, there were less than two hours until the time limit of 2pm.

The sports ground was behind the school building, so there was no way to reach it directly. They must either circle around the building or cross the courtyard. Along the way, enemies were probably going to obstruct them. Besides, even after

reaching the sports ground, time was still needed for destroying «Dieu le veut»— They really had no idea whether an allotment of two hours was plentiful or too little. Unsure what could happen next, they must not be careless or complacent.

Their course of action was to swiftly converge with the in-school team first then head to the sports ground together. They wanted to verify the situation by meeting the in-school team first. Before running into the sports ground, they also needed to release the students. Besides, the reason why they had kept the «Demon's Mouth» so far instead of destroying it was so that they could control when the hypnosis was lifted, to prevent the students from entering a state of panic after regaining their senses. The timing must be chosen with caution. But at the very least, they were certain that the hypnosis must be lifted while the knights were still in disarray from losing «Auschwitz-Birkenau», before they did anything to the students.

They had decided on the infirmary, first floor of the school building, as their meeting point for now. Slipping into the white smoke, hiding in the bushes, advancing while trying their utmost to avoid combat, they entered the school building. Along the way, they met one knight, but Konoha and Kotetsu went all-out to take him down the instant they encountered him. Although Konoha and Kotetsu rushed out of the smoke in what was tantamount to a surprise attack, the opponent's arm strength and endurance seemed to have risen to unnatural levels, presumably due to "Dominionization." Had they engaged him in frontal combat, time might have been lost to the battle dragging on.

The group then reached the door to the infirmary by following a noisy corridor. After they knocked, someone unlocked from inside without saying a word. Upon entering, they saw—

"Everyone...!"

Inside the room where all the curtains were shut, Haruaki found every face there a little nostalgic.

Probably staying on high alert as a matter of principle, Un Izoey had her foot raised while holding a knife. Presumably due to the earlier phone call, Shiraho

was glaring viciously at Haruaki whereas Sovereignty instantly rushed over to hug Fear. Dressed in gym clothes, Chihaya glanced in their direction with displeasure while Isuzu greeted them, smiling as always. Shovel carried on her shoulder, Kaidou the teacher was observing the situation outside through a gap in the curtains.

In addition—

"Wow! It's Fear-chan, Fear-chan! It feels like it's been such a long time. I'm not going to lose, here's a hug from me!"

"Muugu."

Then immediately after Sovereignty, Kana hugged Fear along with her head of silver hair tightly against her chest.

Rotating his arm, Taizou also walked towards them.

"Hi Haruaki, it's quite a shame you didn't get to see me in action. I'm definitely winning the MVP award."

After exchanging a glance with Fear, Haruaki relaxed his expression, but Fear awkwardly lowered her gaze as though she had suddenly thought of something.

"Umm... Uh... Basically, as mentioned on the phone too, I—"

"Time out~ I don't want to talk about anything that'll force Fear-chan to make such a sad face~ I don't wanna listen either~ Listen carefully, Fear-chan, you are yourself and we are us. This will absolutely stay the same forever no matter what. Okay~?"

"Okay—!"

"Hey slow down, Taichi! You're proudly making a thumbs up way too fast! You've got to listen to the reply first!"

After she saw the two of them act excessively upbeat as always, Fear's shoulders began to shake—

"Back to the subject... Is it really necessary to say it...?"

Head lowered, staring at the floor, Fear simply raised her right hand.

Then she made a thumbs up.

"Of course it's okay..."

"Great—!"

As though celebrating a batter's home run, Kana and Taizou made fists and bumped them against Fear's fist that was gesturing thumbs up.

Watching the scene with a gentle expression just like Haruaki, Kirika spoke up:

"Well... Unfortunately, the current situation does not permit us the leisure to enjoy this reunion. Let's decide our next move."

"I answer with an answer of agreement. Is this all of your group, everyone present?"

Haruaki glanced behind him. Fear, Konoha, Kirika, Kotetsu and Kuroe, in other words, the usual members of the group.

"Yeah. We also contacted the superintendent just now to let them know the gates are opened, so they might be coming later. As for the leader of your organization, we didn't go out of our way to contact him, but he'll find out and visit on his own, I presume."

Un Izoey nodded silently as though going "Very likely."

"Then there's Pops... Since he's not a fighter and he said he'll be helping out in other ways, I'm guessing it's related to the town. Anyway, don't mind him."

"In any case, thinking about people who are not present won't help. The enemy has probably discovered the fact that we've broken into the premises, so they'll soon find us even if we stay in the infirmary. We have to decide our next move as quickly as possible."

"Yeah. Of course, the top priority is destroying that *spear*—It's called «Dieu le veut», right? But... before that, the students need to be taken care of first."

Saying that, Chihaya looked up in sudden realization.

"That's right. It's great that we don't want them to panic, but in terms of concrete plans, what are we going to do? Do we have a solution thought up?"

In response, Kirika said:

"Yes. We still haven't destroyed the «Demon's Mouth». It's right here."

Kirika spoke and opened the bag hanging on her shoulder, allowing everyone to peer at the cursed megaphone inside. Due to Taciturn smashing it, there was still no lid on it.

"...Then what?"

Kirika sighed.

"Although it's absolutely ridiculous... We've no choice but to go there first. Namely, the broadcasting room."

The group was running in the corridor. There was no point trying to hide by this point. While weaving through the students—

"Yo! You guys!"

"Get out of the way!" "Move aside!" "...!"

Every time a knight appeared, Konoha, Kotetsu and Un Izoey were in charge of disposal. Probably without killing them.

"This has been bugging me for a while now! Could these enemies actually be quite easy to handle, Konoha!?"

"You're getting that impression only because we have the element of surprise and numerical superiority on our side. It feels like I can't inflict any damage unless I chop at arms with the determination to sever them, for example... Compared to the enemies before, I feel that this knight just now had become even more resilient."

"R-Really...? After all, there's no much time left till 'Dominionization' finishes. Does that mean the power-up effect is about to reach completion? We've got to hurry!"

After some effort, the group finally reached the broadcasting room. Although it was locked, that meant nothing before Konoha and the others. Breaking the lock, they stormed the room.

As expected of a broadcasting room, the internal layout was clearly different from other classrooms. First of all, like the dance studio earlier, there was a soundproofed door. After opening the soundproofed door, there was a staggering arrangement of devices like a console. Gray carpet was laid over the floor to eliminate the sound of footsteps—Speaking of which, there were slippers placed at the entrance, which meant that shoes were forbidden inside to begin with. Behind the console was a recording room isolated by glass, but one could apparently use the console to make announcements without going inside there.

Why could they conclude that? Because there was a walkman-like accessory hanging in front of the giant microphone inside the room—A speaker whose shape resembled a rice ball. Sitting in boredom on the seat before the console was a young blond knight, presumably in charge of guarding this speaker.

"Huh? Ah?"

The young knight only had enough time to exclaim in surprise and turn his head back.

Swiftly dragging him down to the floor, Kotetsu proceeded to play a horrifying symphony of snapping and cracking. When Kotetsu got up next, the knight was collapsed on the floor groaning with all the joints in his limbs visibly dislocated.

"Truth be told, he was way too open..."

"But Kotetsu, you were planning to fracture his arms and legs, right?"

"Yes, of course."

"Even if this young man was careless and inattentive, his body was still fortified to such an astounding degree... Oh my, I get the feeling that things will not be so easy here on."

"It's very likely that the enemy changed tactics after «Auschwitz-Birkenau»'s destruction. In other words, they are taking a final stand to defend their lord and «Dieu le veut», leaving only a handful of knights inside the school building... These knights are probably disposable pawns of inconsequential value."

"I see..."

Haruaki nodded after listening to Kirika. In other words, things were going smoothly only for now... But no matter what, they had to finish what they needed to do first.

At this moment, Haruaki suddenly realized there was a problem. Sweeping his gaze across everyone present, he said:

"By the way, who will do it...?"

"It is perfectly obvious that it is my job."

Kaidou was the one who spoke up. Opening the bag carried by Kirika, she took out the «Demon's Mouth» without asking. Because she acted in such a natural and straightforward manner, it was quite worrying whether she actually understood what it entailed.

"S-Sensei? Are you sure? That Wathe's long-distance system is already broken, so the curse will affect the user as well. It will definitely be hard to resist—"

"No matter. Rather, precisely because of that, I must be the one to do it."

Resting her shovel against the console, Kaidou operated a switch near the microphone. As a member of the faculty, she was probably trained in the most basic usage.

"If you still cannot understand from what I have said, allow me to give you two reasons."

Kaidou proceeded to adjust a certain portion of the devices. Still facing the console, she continued to speak:

"First of all, there is the curse mentioned just now. Without any special abilities, it is unlikely that I will be able to assist in the next part. Rather, I might become a liability. In that case, there is nothing wrong with monopolizing the only thing I can do... As for the other reason—"

After saying this, she finally turned to face the group.

Then in a truly rare moment...

She made an amused smile, relaxing her face for the grinning corners of her mouth.

"Giving *these orders* is precisely a teacher's job—Do you not agree?"

Cover your ears well and resist the hypnosis—After leaving these final words—

Kaidou pressed the switch, connecting this place to every speaker all over the school.

Then raising the megaphone in front of the mic, she inhaled forcefully—

"—**Hört!!**"

"I hereby declare lessons to be over today. Everyone go home immediately. That is all!"

Part 4

"«Auschwitz-Birkenau» has been destroyed?"

"What are the knights inside doing!?"

"There is no point in complaining now. Orders to assemble have been issued from above. We will return!"

After receiving reports, the raid teams on the streets changed course for the school. As foreigners dressed in heavy coats, they attracted a lot of local attention, but there was no time to care about that. «Dieu le veut» at the school was the backbone of the operation—as well as the Knights Dominion organization itself—hence it must be protected at all costs.

Everyone had memorized the geographic layout for the most part, hence they started sprinting back to the school along the shortest route. Stepping on asphalt, jumping over guardrails, traversing parks, they moved in a straight line.

Then running along a shortcut and jumping over the wall at the end, they reached a small alley. However, there was a vending machine in the alley. A woman was currently turning around, picking up a drink from the dispenser. Her location was precisely their landing spot.

"Obstruction."

Under such circumstances, there was no need to hesitate whether or not to kick away a pebble at one's feet. "...Hmm?" The woman seemed to notice the knights' arrival and turned her face towards them. However, the knight in front did not care and executed a kick using his falling momentum. She was probably getting a broken nose at most. Just curse her poor luck.

However—

"Gah!"

He ended up being the one who got his nose smashed instead. The woman simply tilted her head slightly to dodge the kick, then even went as far as to extend her arm along his leg to counterattack his face. As though in an attempt to

compensate for arm length, she even stood her drink upright on her palm, thus striking him in the nose with what was akin to a lengthened base of the palm. Carbonated liquid spurted out from the can.

As a result, the man in front lost consciousness and fell pathetically on the ground. The two remaining knights who jumped the wall immediately after him landed next to the wall and stared warily at the woman.

"Woman, who are you!?"

Completely normal in appearance, the Caucasian woman was dressed in a black business suit. Roughly in her twenties, she had a head of short blonde hair. On her elegant suit, she was wearing a striking tie of brilliant red as though it was the aspect where she could exercise self-determination, or perhaps an act of defiance against something.

Shaking her head, the woman said:

"Sigh~ ...What rotten luck. Of all times, for me to encounter you guys on my break, even losing my soft drink that costs an absurd amount of 120 yen. Price levels in this country are way too high..."

"We can't waste time on this mentally unbalanced passerby. Treat her as an enemy! Attack!"

"Roger that!"

Now that one of the knights had been taken out by her, there was no need to show mercy. The other two knights drew their swords and approached the woman, but—

"Oho~ Not bad, such quick wits. After all, if you chose to escape, I'll still be able to chase you down!"

The woman grinned with her canines showing in a belligerent and vicious expression. Then she clenched her fists and approached the knights too. Undoubtedly, her courage, movements and speed belonged to no amateur.

"You...?"

"Haha, come, let me have as much fun as possible! You guys have been strengthened by some kind of Wathe's power, right?"

Hence—

Several minutes later, going "good grief," she sat down on an impromptu chair created on the spot. The chair's materials consisted of three unconscious knights piled up on top of one another. Searching through their coats without permission, she took out wallets—then suddenly slumped her shoulders.

"What kind of idiots are these guys? I can't believe they only have British pounds... At least pay me back for my soft drink."

While saying that, she still stuffed her trophies into her pocket. After a quick break to catch her breath, she took out her cellphone.

"I took care of three. Send the cleaners over."

The man speaking to her answered in a muffled voice as usual:

'Wow~ How amazing. I will send someone right away.'

"It's only reasonable to pay me a bigger bonus. Even I find myself working with such dedication."

'Based on your character, you're going to made a tidy profit either way through blackmail or threats anyway, right? Villains will be arrested by the police, so please take care.'

To mask the sudden surprise in her heart, she hastily said:

"Shut up! The way I see it, you definitely count as a villain too."

'Oh really? How?'

"Using poison and antidotes to coerce obedience from me. Dying if I don't drink your antidote, isn't that way too absurd? What kind of movie are we acting out?"

'This is necessary as a beast tamer. If you don't believe me, you could always run away.'

"..."

Knowing clearly that they were in a cooperative relationship of mutual benefit, the man still talked like this deliberately. She was totally unconvinced that what he said about poisoning was actually true.

However, even if it was a joke, having a reason was better than none.

It was a fact that this man used to be even stronger than her. It was also a fact that she had lost to them in the past. It was also true that she believed she could get at least a bit stronger as long as she sought this man's tutelage—

She sighed. Anyway, life was still long. She did not think it mattered if she took a slight detour, hence, for now, she would continue this temporary lifestyle as something akin to his lackey.

"So, how are things on your side?"

'Things are officially beginning. Rather, it would be better to say that it seems to have already started.'

She thought so too. The background had become noisy on the other end of the phone call starting just now.

'Unfortunately, I won't be calling you over. Because somehow, I feel as though it would be too much to handle if I called Miss Beast who can only be tamed through poison. Just do your own work obediently. Bye now.'

After giving these instructions, the man hung up.

"Tsk... Now isn't this delightful?"

Remarking sarcastically, she imagined the party venue. Which people were going to take part? Just picturing it was almost enough to make her drool, crap.

However, she did not drool. Instead she smiled fearlessly.

Now was not the time to remain bound by principles and rationality. Prepare yourself and eat the poisoned feed willingly. Because if you were to do nothing, the master feeding her could very well die there just like that. She forbade him from dying in futility.

"Seriously... I can't believe he told me an awesome party's location without sending me an invitation. That's underestimating me too much. Kaha!"

Part 5

In the courtyard which was surrounded on all four sides by the school building...

Haruaki ducked down to evade an enemy attack. At the same time, he continued speaking:

"Earlier, «Dieu le veut» was planted on the Dominion Lord's wheelchair, right? I guess we've no choice but to get to him, right?"

"My statement: That is «Mobile Territory: Zilch Ground», used to create a 'temporary territory for the Dominion Lord to move around.' I think the 'Dominionization' of this town is by another spear... Probably by the Dominion Lord's side, so not much difference."

"I see. Then where should we go?"

"Probably the biggest tent on the sports ground!"

While answering, Un Izoey swung the knife on her foot and sent a knight flying. However, another knight seized the resulting opening to attack her. Kotetsu and Konoha blocked it for her.

On the other side—

"Mode: «Killing Machine Masakado»!"

"Go, «Chupacabra Bandage»!"

After Kuroe's hair and Kirika's bandage entangled the enemy, Fear punched him flying without saying a word. Although she had no weapon, given her supernatural brute force, the enemy probably could not escape uninjured.

Most conspicuous was ultimately what Kirika had used to face off against Taciturn, «Chupacabra Bandage»—the cursed bandage originally used by Amanda when she was still Mummy Maker. Pakuaki had apparently given it to Kirika without asking her opinion. Amanda seemed to have explained briefly the method of usage, but Haruaki felt that Kirika was controlling it quite adeptly. Was it because of its similarity to the «Tragic Black River» in shape and usage?

At this moment, Haruaki heard talking next to him.

"...Just do your own work obediently. Bye now."

"You must be confident if you can still make phone calls in these circumstances."

The superintendent, who had just met up with them, shrugged and replied:

"Now is the only chance to talk on the phone, right? There's probably no more time to make calls from here on."

Naturally, Zenon and Ganon were also by the superintendent's side, fighting knights respectively.

Haruaki shifted his gaze slightly, towards the school building entrance that was visible from the courtyard through a corridor window—This was exactly the reason why they had come here.

Large numbers of students could be seen leaving the school building through the entrance. A normal after school scene, with students carrying schoolbags, filing through while chatting with their friends. This came as a result of Kaidou's hypnotic suggestion. As a side note, after issuing the hypnotic suggestion, Kaidou

had said "Well then... I am going home" and immediately left the broadcasting room. She was probably hit by the curse as well. No matter what, Haruaki could feel only gratitude towards her.

Apart from those present, the others including Taizou, Kana and Shiraho had already returned to the secret room at the superintendent's office, taking the «Demon's Mouth» with them. Although Haruaki really hoped they could leave the school, they insisted "It's possible we might be needed somewhere again!" Of course, Shiraho and Chihaya were grumbling nonstop.

Like Haruaki, Fear glanced at the students leaving to go home while she took out another restrained knight. At the same time, she said:

"By the way... It's lucky that they didn't give the students a hard time!"

"Probably because we're making a scene here, they don't have any energy to spare on other things!"

"I think so too... Although it's absolutely ridiculous, now that things have come to this, we can't go into hiding again. Instead, we must rampage as much as possible and keep pushing forward!"

The Knights Dominion had originally used the «Demon's Mouth»'s hypnosis to take the students hostage. Now that the hypnosis was lifted, the students were starting to return home on their own. No one could predict what might happen next. There was no guarantee that the knights would not attack the students directly in typical and petty acts of intimidation. But currently, it looked like that was not going to happen, be it due to circumstance or their pride. Although Haruaki also believed that Konoha and the others, who had entered combat mode thoroughly already, would immediately bring divine retribution upon the knights the instant they tried to attack students in leisure—in any case, it would be best if that type of situation could be avoided completely.

In other words, just as Kirika described.

They could only push forward, devoting their full effort so that the enemy was unable to take any action except engage them in combat.

"Still... There are so many of them. My hair is getting a bit tired."

"Agreed, there ought to be limits on tiredness~"

"Please get moving before complaining, Onee-sama."

Speaking of moving forward, there were too many knights blocking their way. No matter how many they defeated, knights would emerge one after another from somewhere, surging forward to attack. In addition, with every knight strengthened under the effects of "Dominionization," they were not easy to handle at all.

Haruaki looked up at the clock in the courtyard&mash;It was almost 1pm.

He shuddered. The predetermined time limit was 2pm. In other words, the enemy's powerup had already reached 80 to 90% completion.

Furthermore—More importantly—

Haruaki shuddered simply for the lack of time remaining. The time limit they had decided upon was based on the belief that things were definitely fine at least until 2pm. Hence, strictly speaking, there should still be a bit of stoppage time even after 2pm... Nevertheless, they had no idea if it was on the order of seconds or minutes. They could not leave things to chance.

The remaining time was only roughly an hour. Just one hour, failure was not an option, no second chances. This was the only chance.

Stopping the Knights Dominion's conspiracy.

Protecting that place where they belonged.

The chance to protect the Yachi home—

Haruaki subconsciously clenched both fists. Due to muscle tension, he felt a dull sensation of intense pain coming from the missing part of his left hand. This felt like it was cheering for himself.

At this moment, the superintendent said:

"I think this might take forever at this rate. Should we part ways to split up the Knights Dominion's forces?"

"That appears to be the only option."

"I give agreement to agree this is great idea. No need to have everyone moving together the whole time. All it takes is for some of us to reach and destroy «Dieu le veut». Although it is easier for large groups to hunt prey, it also slows down movement speed."

Konoha and Un Izoey both nodded.

"Then what about the groupings? To be honest, I don't want my group to split up."

"My opinion: suggestion that I am fine alone."

Hearing that, Haruaki was a bit surprised.

"Hey hey, are you for real...?"

"I do not plan on defeating all knights on every encounter. I will find the Dominion Lord's tent and destroy «Dieu le veut». One person will not get tied down, easier to move perhaps."

That being said—Was there any reason for Un Izoey to do this? Haruaki wondered. The reason why Pakuaki assisted them was to rescue Un Izoey who was trapped in the school. In that case, his objective was already achieved.

Probably sensing his thoughts through the mood, Un Izoey glanced at Haruaki and said:

"For the Lab Chief's Nation, 'Dominionization' is not phenomenon to be left alone either. My own opinion: reached conclusion that it must be stopped as quickly as possible."

"Really? ...Uh, but, how should I put this? Thank you."

"No need to thank. I am just doing what I need to do."

Un Izoey looked away suddenly for some reason. Then the superintendent spoke up:

"So, my group will move independently then. I think we will be responsible for acting as bait, so the three of us are enough. We'll show you how quickly adults can flee."

"Eh~ So tired~"

"I could prepare an alternative mission for you. How about letting you run alone while screaming and yelling, charging into the enemy's headquarters from the front? Which do you pick, Onee-sama?"

In this manner, the superintendent formed his usual team of three. In other words, they had divided themselves into three: Haruaki's main team, Un Izoey as the independent guerilla team, as well as the superintendent's diversionary team.

"...You must all stay safe."

Fear said with a serious face. Un Izoey, the superintendent and the Houjyou sisters nodded firmly. Then—

"I return the same words to you exactly, wishing this kind of wish!"

"Once everything is over, we have to gather for a cup of tea. But according to reports, cleaning up the superintendent's office first will be quite a monumental task!"

To break past the knights surrounding them, they charged in completely opposite directions. Un Izoey went towards a dense cluster of enemies whereas the superintendent's group went for somewhere with fewer enemies. In that sense, things were completely opposite too.

"We too—Let's go!"

"Yes! Haruaki-kun, please take care no matter what!"

With Konoha and Kotetsu taking point, the group began to advance towards the sports ground. Most likely chasing after Un Izoey and the superintendent's team, much fewer knights showed up next. However, that was just compared to earlier. The current situation still did not allow for carelessness.

They continued to move forward while doing everything they could to take down the enemies who emerged every few meters along the courtyard. The connecting corridor between two wings of the school building could be seen up ahead. Once they passed through there, the grassy lawn of the courtyard would give way to a plain space between two buildings, covered only by asphalt. Then running from there to the edge of the school building—The sports ground ought to be visible from there.

"Konoha, above! Second floor of the connecting corridor!"

"I shall handle it! Muramasa-sama, take care of the right hand side!"

"Sorry Kuroe-kun, my defense failed! Left side!"

"Mode: «Chaotic Tadamori»—Anyway, I'll lead you guys to jump towards the third floor window!"

After much effort, they finally dealt with the last wave of attack before entering the connecting corridor. Confirming there were no ambushes from above, they crossed the connecting corridor all at once. Success! The sensation underfoot changed from lawn to hard asphalt.

Perhaps that was it for the enemies who had rushed over to the courtyard. Haruaki turned his head back slightly to check out the view behind him, only to discover that no new enemies had rushed out of the connecting corridor or the school building. Was diverting manpower to Un Izoey and the superintendent part of the reason?

No worries. At the current pace, they were going to reach their destination soon. No need to be concerned about the time limit. Ah, at this rate, there was no need to worry at all. No matter how many more knights came, they would surely—

Just as Haruaki was thinking that—

In front of him, Fear suddenly stopped running. Haruaki's nose collided into the back of her head.

"Woah! F-Fear...?"

Fear did not look back. Like Fear, Konoha and everyone present halted in their tracks.

Looking past Fear's head, Haruaki also checked out what they were all staring at with bated breaths.

He was rendered speechless.

—Why the Knights Dominion had stopped attacking for now. Why there were gaps of time between attacks.

Perhaps it was not just due to the success of diversionary tactics from Un Izoey and the superintendent's faction.

Perhaps it was simply because the Knights Dominion's numbers were decreasing.

In other words—

"Oh! You guys are so late~"

Scattered all over the ground, in front of them were *countless bodies of dead knights*.

And in the center of the corpses, all covered with splatters of fresh blood, yet looking back at Haruaki's group with a smile—Ontenzaki Satsuko.

Part 6

As one would expect, Fourteen was also by Satsuko's side. With pale blue ghostlights hovering all around her body, it felt like she was going to fire off attacks any moment. A reinforced broom was already held in her hand.

Satsuko was also in the process of killing a knight. While she turned her head to look back, the man collapsed in front of her with his throat cut open. Swinging «Karma Speed» with a whoosh, Satsuko flung off viscous blood then muttered as though talking to herself:

"Hmm, this Wathe itself can be used as a weapon too~ Although it can't be used to hit places that are too hard, that's all."

Fear glared at Satsuko and said:

"...We don't have time for you right now. Move aside."

"Eh~ Sorry, no can do, Fear-san~ That'll waste all the waiting we did for you here."

"I don't recall asking you two to wait for us."

"Hmm, if you insist, how about tomorrow instead?"

Konoha spoke with eyes narrowed whereas Kuroe followed up blankly.

"But isn't there a party right now? Although Satsuko will play with any opponent encountered, a bit of attention needs to be paid to sequence after all~ Anyway, putting it bluntly, if Fear-san and the rest of you continue forward, Satsuko has a strong feeling that you'll be killed by the Knights Dominion people. So Satsuko hopes you'll fight us before that~"

"Such presumptuous reasoning, absolutely ridiculous...!"

Kirika glanced at Haruaki. Konoha and the others also directed the same kind of questioning gaze at him.

Haruaki understood what they meant. Their options boiled down to two: fight or flight. Their objective was not defeating Satsuko. Even if she issued a challenge to them, they were not obliged to accept—

"Oh. Uh~ Umm, although it's only natural since someone like Satsuko is your opponent, if you really ignore me and escape, Satsuko will still feel very sad~ So please think back a bit, to a very long time ago during the battle at the pool, those massive pillars Fourt had shot, does everyone still remember~? After repairs and fortifications, she can now launch many pillars~"

"So... What?"

Hearing Fear's question, Satsuko smiled.

"—Those are really huge things, you know? To liven things up, how about throwing some at the school building right now with a 'boom~'? That place where you can see the shoe lockers is the most suitable, right? Although Satsuko has no other intentions."

"What!?"

No other intentions? Don't be ridiculous!

Haruaki looked at the far end of the courtyard where they had just escaped, the place where shoe lockers were kept—although much fewer in number now, there were still students preparing to go home after school. If a massive pillar, the type they saw during the swimming pool battle against Satsuko and Fourteen in the past, one that caused the exit to collapse completely, were to be thrown there, the students would surely suffer grievous injuries.

Fear gnashed her teeth and said:

"A threat huh...? You disgust me...!"

"Oh dear~ Satsuko and Fourt only wish to fight you guys, Fear-san, that's all~ It should end quite quickly, so you don't need to be so stubborn. The previous fight got interrupted half way, so Satsuko just wants to confirm, even though weak

little Satsuko is clearly very weak, how much more competent Satsuko has become!"



Indeed, there was probably not much point for the Knights Dominion to take students hostage again—but this logic was impossible to apply to Satsuko before them. She simply wanted a fight. Simply fighting followed by more fighting, wanting to become strong.

A simple and genuine motive, almost approaching insanity.

The natural *way of life* as a member of the Draconians.

"Tsk... Fighting is the only option?"

"Ha! I shall humor them. Now that the sight of blood has gotten me worked up, I shall find it difficult to hold back."

"—Actually, the same goes for me too."

Konoha and Kotetsu revealed savage grins and took a step forward. In contrast, Haruaki, Fear, Kirika and Kuroe stepped back. Kirika glanced at the surroundings while extending Chupacabra Bandage from her arm.

"We can't leave these two for Konoha-kun and Kotetsu-kun to handle on their own. Kuroe-kun and I must provide cover... But the knights might show up any time. Yachi, Fear-kun, let us know as soon as you spot anything."

"...Got it."

Haruaki looked at the silver-haired girl after he replied. Eyes narrowed, glaring viciously ahead, her answer was—

Part 7

Fear felt a certain unpleasant entity stirring in the depths of her heart.

The color of bright red dominated her view. It came from the dead knights' bodies created by Satsuko.

She felt nausea and discomfort towards this stench of blood and death that she knew better than anyone. But at the same time, she also sensed a certain existence taking joy from all this. Something causing dull aches, thirsting for the taste of brutality. In the bottom of her body, even if one were to take out her organs, slice them to pieces and mix them up, the darkness would still adhere firmly to somewhere deep and unreachable.

No matter how much she wanted it to disappear, no matter how much she wanted to pretend it had disappeared, the throbbing of that parasitic existence was still ominously shaking the cells of her core.

Indeed, *that*.

Assuredly—it still—existed.

Hence, worry crept into her heart. She could feel an irrepressible part of her lingering in her body.

She was still able to suppress it because these were irrelevant knights, but if she were to see the blood or corpse of someone she knew—

(I'm not... gonna lose.)

Fear gritted her teeth hard and forcefully carved this declaration into the depths of her heart.

She must admit that her unease. Even so, she already had the determination and resolve to triumph over it. That was why she was standing here. She was not going to be devoured so easily.

Besides, the worst case scenario of her companions ending up like that would not happen in reality. There was no weapon in her hand. If worse came to worst, she had already asked the Japanese swords for the favor. Hence, don't worry. Don't worry. Don't worry. Don't worry. Don't worry. Surely—It will be fine.

(...Yeah.)

After repeating those words nonstop, she suddenly felt a lighter feeling in her chest.

She really felt that it will be fine. Imagination was very important. She believed that what she ought to think about was not insignificant worries but the vast ocean of hope that lay before her eyes.

No need to worry. There was not the slightest need for worry.

What she desired was already in front of her.

Indeed—

So long as she overcame the crisis today, she would be able to stay with Haruaki forever.

Because this happiness was already in view up ahead, all she needed to do next was keep her head high and continue striving forward.

Part 8

Before giving her answer, she paused for roughly a breath's worth of time.

However, her tone of voice was calm and natural.

"Yeah, leave it to me. I'm only here more for defense than offense. I have to complete this mission at least."

Well said, that goes without saying—Haruaki felt relieved. The current Fear would no longer lose to fighting instincts and charge mindlessly at the enemy. She was giving thought to what was within her ability instead of trying to act tough.

"Rather, Class Rep and Kuroe should be more careful. I remember they—"

Cautiously, Kirika stared at Satsuko and Fourteen, nodding lightly.

"I know. Fourteen will be launching items for her to accumulate speed and release that giant slash attack... Their tactic is like self-sufficient power generation, it's very tough to handle."

"Yeah. But in games, skills that are powerful in theory tend to have major flaws."

"Kuroe-san is correct. That tactic of theirs cannot be an exception."

"Just stop her from throwing things before they manage to store up the speed! I shall take care of that house!"

As Kotetsu dashed towards Fourteen, Konoha said "Then I will—" and closed in on Satsuko a moment later. Fourteen retreated backwards and dodged the attack Kotetsu launched to prevent her from throwing items. Her broom destroyed by Kotetsu, Fourteen nonchalantly summoned a new weapon, then shot two bricks at Satsuko while swinging a laundry pole downwards.

However, Satsuko was currently facing off against Konoha who was attacking with barehanded chops executed in taijiquan style. Although Satsuko used «Karma Speed» to block, the weapons became entangled together as though sparring without accumulating speed. As though saying "it doesn't matter who it hits," Fourteen shot bricks at both Satsuko and Konoha, but—

"Chupacabra Bandage!"

"Mode: «Cushioning Munemori»!"

Kirika's bandage and Kuroe's hair blocked the bricks. Kuroe wanted to take the opportunity to ensnare Satsuko in her hair, but Satsuko used «Karma Speed» in its original function as a sword and sliced the hair before jumping away. Konoha seized the chance to close in.

"Wow~ So that's how it goes~ As expected of Konoha-san and the others, you immediately came up with countermeasures~ Then we'll switch tactics too."

"...What did you say?"

Instantly, Satsuko and Fourteen doubled their speed at the same time. Moving swiftly, they traded positions in a bewildering display. Kotetsu and Konoha hastily chased after them.

"«Polter»—«Geist»! «Geist»!"

Fourteen made a motion as though pushing a pair of doors to summon two laundry poles to launch. Neither Kirika nor Kuroe could stop the laundry poles from flying away—because instead of aiming at Satsuko or Konoha, Fourteen had shot them towards the school building beside them. The laundry poles were respectively embedded in the walls of the school building on their left and right.

Satsuko instantly changed course for a laundry pole while waving «Karma Speed» in her hand.

Next—using them like last time at the pool when they used laundry poles as footholds to move across water, Fourteen and Satsuko simultaneously stepped on a laundry pole on opposite sides respectively and jumped up high.

Their bodies overlapped for an instant in midair—

But only Satsuko disappeared.

"...!?"

Kotetsu frowned. Summoning two brooms while in the air, Fourteen swung them at him while traveling along her landing trajectory. Kotetsu crossed his arms above his head to block the attack but in the next second, Konoha shouted urgently:

"Kotetsu! Watch out, there is one more person inside!"

While Konoha was shouting and Fourteen's wielded weapons were locked in a struggle against Kotetsu, Satsuko suddenly appeared from under Fourteen's cape. This was below Kotetsu's belly, closer to him than even Fourteen. In a crouching pose, Satsuko swung «Karma Speed» in a flash.

"Guh&mdahs;!"

Frowning, Kotetsu flew backwards to retreat. The flank of his clothing was torn and a conspicuous red color seeped out.

"H-Hey!"

"Don't sound so lame! It is but a scratch..."

Kotetsu answered Haruaki while keeping his view forward vigilantly. Before him, Satsuko was already straightening her knees to stand up.

"Oh my~ Looks like victory can't be decided in one hit after all."

"Muramasa-sama, that is—"

"Instantaneously entering Fourteen's body whose true nature is a *house*, then coming out again? Totally just a petty parlor trick."

"Ehhh~ Really~? As long as it's used well, Satsuko thinks it's unexpectedly effective~"

"«Geist»! «Geist»!"

Satsuko cocked her head slightly while Fourteen shot laundry poles and iron rods at the school building on the side again. Moreover, it was not just one or two. The school building was turned into an array of skewers. Satsuko and Fourteen jumped again, landing on the footholds created by Fourteen, then started jumping between footholds as though performing in an athletic event. In addition to stepping on the poles and columns, Satsuko even grabbed the laundry poles with her hands to swing her body like in gymnastics horizontal bar events. While moving, Fourteen continued to shoot out new laundry poles to increase the number of footholds.

"It'd be bad if you got bored, so Satsuko and Fourt will be turning in a grand performance~! Satsuko will work hard to prevent you from calling this a parlor trick!"

"This looks more and more like a circus act. We don't have money to pay for unspectacular shows...!"

Tensing up, Haruaki's group looked up at the two figures jumping back and forth overhead like pinballs.

Fourteen fired two bricks at them. Konoha and the others dodged swiftly but at the same time, Fourteen also launched three bricks at Satsuko in midair, which were then immediately absorbed by «Karma Speed». After repeating similar movements multiple times, Satsuko and Fourteen overlapped in the air again. Fourteen flipped her cape again and Satsuko vanished.

After leaping from foothold to foothold many times, Fourteen jumped upon Haruaki's group again as earlier. Konoha blocked her attack and watched out for Satsuko who was assumed to be hiding under the cape—

"How about this? Slicing wind at point blank range...!"

Realizing suddenly, Haruaki cried out frantically:

"No, Konoha, right above!"

The last foothold that Fourteen had visited—Satsuko was standing on there. Just before Fourteen mounted her descending attack, she must have left Satsuko there. Satsuko was already ecstatic with her face flushed red. Then she swung the rapier down hard.

"This is—karma!"

The giant mass of slicing pressure descended like a waterfall, flying at them vertically.

Naturally, Fourteen already expected this attack. After merely a slight delay after Fourteen, Konoha also jumped from her original spot, but the situation was very risky. Also, Haruaki and the others could not stay uninvolved either.

"Haruaki, get away quick!"

Fear pushed Haruaki. Naturally, he did not resist and started running as hard as he could. There was no guarantee that the next slash would not reach their location. Even the wake of that attack posed a threat. Just as Haruaki and Fear hastily pulled back to create distance—

The vertical slash brushed past Konoha's body, striking her former location directly. The massive ensuing crash made Haruaki's eardrums hurt. Violent air pressure swept his hair. Not only that, but it even caused him to stumble and fall flat on the ground. Certain fragments flew in all directions, striking him in the body. Ouch. Speaking of pain, the left hand he had extended reflexively against the ground for support was feeling sharp pain from the amputated spot.

Then opening his eyes, Haruaki saw the asphalt ground which had tragically cracked open. Probably injured by flying stones, Fear had small bloody scratches on her face. Wiping the blood away with the back of her hand, Fear directed her gaze forward. The four of them nearer to the impact had suffered far more than Haruaki and Fear. Kirika and Kuroe were tangled together and blown far away, but seemed uninjured. Kotetsu was kneeling on the ground with a twisted look on his face. Among them, the one with the most serious injuries was—

"Guh...!"

"Konoha!"

"I... am fine...!"

Although it looked like she had dodged by a hair's breadth, Konoha had a large gash on her shoulder just from a minor glancing blow. The patch of bright red on her was even larger in area than Kotetsu's. Konoha glanced coldly at her wound then exhaled, suppressing a certain emotion into the depths of her core. Calmly, she tore off her dangling sleeve to facilitate movement. Judging from her motions, the wound was not as bad as it looked... But Haruaki had almost never seen such a large wound on Konoha's body before. And clearly, it was not even a direct blow.

Many laundry poles and iron rods were embedded in the school building's walls to their left and right, as well as the side wall of the connecting corridor, forming footholds.

Standing on them, Satsuko and Fourteen were looking down at Haruaki's group.

"Oh my... They actually dodged that attack? Amazing as expected! Satsuko is overjoyed!"

Satsuko spoke confidently. Pushing themselves up, Kirika and Konoha grumbled with a frown:

"Tsk! What joy? This firepower is absolutely ridiculous...!"

"Their current tactic is to reduce the speed accumulation period as much as possible then unleash the attack freely from various angles, thus making full use of terrain..."

"Yes, indeed! Although very weak, Satsuko and Fourt's advantage is cooperation and tacit understanding after all! By increasing or removing footholds, Satsuko can appear or disappear to make use of three dimensional tactics~"

"Satsuko has excellent speed to begin with, but as a result, her weakness is also a lack of attack power. Weaponry is one of the reasons. But after obtaining «Karma Speed», this problem is solved... Don't mistakenly think we're still the same as before."

"Yeah~ It's all thanks to «Karma Speed». So lucky to have it, it fits Satsuko so well! Since this method works, Satsuko will try to challenge you, please play with us a while longer!"

Then like a pack of predators surrounding herbivores, slowly depriving their prey of stamina, intimidating them to crush their will to resist.

Also making use of the school building's protrusions and drainpipes, the pair began to jump back and forth over the heads of Haruaki's group. Ghostlights flashing, Fourteen launched items that were sometimes absorbed by Satsuko's

rapier as sources of speed, sometimes used to create new footholds, or sent to attack Haruaki's group directly on other occasions. Satsuko would also disappear suddenly then emerge under Fourteen's cape. Satsuko sometimes followed Fourteen's direct attacks to appear at extremely close range. Other times, she used feints to counter their predictions, only to appear in the distance. It took a lot of effort to keep track of the pair's positions.

"Damn it...!"

Agitated, Konoha jumped up and stood on a laundry pole just like them. Then leaping towards Fourteen, just as she was about to execute a flying kick, an instant before that—having entered Fourteen's cape, Satsuko jumped out and landed lightly on the ground. She was already panting with eyes moistened and glazed over.

"Karma!"

"!"

Konoha must have instantly severed her foothold. Then falling down together with the severed pole, she barely evaded the slash Satsuko had unleashed upwards from below. Vicious light flashed across her glasses as she groaned:

"Up and down, how busy you are...!"

"Oh, just so you don't get the wrong idea, Satsuko will make this clear. We don't really want to run all over the place~ Aerial combat is just one mode of attack. Depending on the situation, we also fight on the ground."

Haruaki gritted his teeth. To him, simply tracking Satsuko and Fourteen's movements with his gaze was hard enough already.

Apart from Fourteen's own combat power as *a cursed house*...

There were footholds all around that they could increase or decrease as they saw fit, in other words, a three dimensional space—Rather, seeing as Satsuko could also enter Fourteen's body to obfuscate timings and positions, it counted as four

dimensions—combined with the tacit understanding born from their relationship of absolute trust, allowing them to rule over this four dimensional space.

In addition, there was «Karma Speed»'s one-hit kill power from its super destructive slash attack—

All this combined to serve as Satsuko and Fourteen's current—

Strength.

...Was it possible to win?

Could they prevail against a pair like this?

Haruaki felt as though his heart was being constricted tightly, causing a vague sense of unease to surge in his body.

He also thought of something.

Time.

There was no leisure to take out his cellphone to check the time, but the deadline was less than an hour away. They should not get themselves pinned down in this kind of place. They must move advance as quickly as possible, advancing towards the sports ground—

However, whether or not Satsuko understood their feelings, she cackled and said:

"Anyway, we're going to move as possible, so enjoy yourselves! As playmates, Satsuko will give it 100% so please go all-out if you please, Satsuko will be very happy—although weak little Satsuko is still very weak, so if you get disappointed, sorry about that!"

Haruaki broke out in cold sweat.

You liar—He thought.

Part 9

The superintendent's team of three was moving along the school's boundary wall.

Then halting, the superintendent turned his head back.

"—I knew you were going to show up."

"Really? Well I suppose, after all, we go way back for years."

As though in an afterthought, he casually floored a knight who was originally about to attack them.

Maximilian Pendragon was standing there in leisure. Wearing «Corpse Armor Rikongarowa» with the «Granaury Spear» on the back of his right hand... He was fully armed.

Grinning, Pendragon said:

"Any intention to move aside?"

"You already know my answer, don't you? I can't let you go over to them. To my dangerous friend who has started an obsession in stalker behavior, I really hope you won't go farther along the wrong path, which is why I can't stay silent... You can't use brute strength to coerce a little girl. Don't use force."

After the superintendent finished with a shrug, Zenon and Ganon stepped forward in front of him.

"Good grief, are you trying to waste my time again like yesterday? No matter how many years we've been separated, I've grown tired of playing around. This time, I won't spar with you like yesterday. Sorry, I'm going to be serious—?"

A crisp sound.

Pendragon raised Granaury's blade to eye level. In the next instant, a knife flying at high speed was deflected by the blade, falling on the ground behind.

The superintendent stared intently at Pendragon. While breaking out in cold sweat, his mind became aware of his hand's trembling fingertips and the creaking in his body.

"Unlike yesterday... It's *three against one* this time."

"Gabriel, do you intend to personally enter the fray? Isn't your body full of problems, to the point that it's difficult to pinpoint them? With your health in such a state already, acting tough won't do you any good."

"Acting tough? Hmm..."

The superintendent reached into his suit and drew a knife from its holster. What a nostalgic feeling... At the same time, this was probably going to be his swan song.

"If I don't act tough now, when else would I have the chance? Clearly the ones behind me are my students—This is my school!"

Switching modes, he threw continuously, launching many knives at the same time. The flowing motion of thrown knives were like wings, like a sword, with each knife followed closely by the next. By calculating and predicting the opponent's angle of deflection, he would alter the trajectory of successive knives as a result. Such throwing fully exhibited the pinnacle of technique. Having learned the majority of his throwing skills, Zenon also joined in to attack with her knives.

Confronted with a continuous stream of thrown knives aimed at his vitals, Pendragon could no longer stand idly in one place. While running, he used Granaury to deflect the flying knives. Although Riko's armor definitely protected the vitals, the superintendent would also predict the armor's changes in thickness through reverse logic so as to throw the next knife and the one after that. Faced with this group, Pendragon could not rely completely on his armor. That being said, armor was armor after all. For knife throwers, armor was definitely a complicating factor.

"Ha... Looks like you and your disciple haven't regressed much in skill."

"I'm very happy to hear you say that."

Intense pain coursed through the depths of his body. His muscles were screaming in pain. His fingertips were convulsing. The superintendent desperately hid these symptoms of unease while he answered, but the dragon's eyes could not possibly miss the prey's weaknesses.

"But who knows when this can persist until."

"Yeah, that's right. Although we have to stall for time bit by bit, no one knows how long it can last... So, it looks like the job I picked has increased. Ahhh, so very tired..."

Waving the tip of her sword left and right, Ganon walked up to the front lethargically. The previous Commander had passed onto her as the sole successor of what could be called swordsmanship for countering the strongest—a style named the Void Night Sword. Ultimately, she still stood as their most powerful combatant.

The superintendent took a deep breath and picked up a knife. Incredibly, he felt nostalgia towards this sensation that should have been forgotten long ago. However, he had *her* by his side back then. Rather, what he carried was not knives, but *her*. The spear that always returned on its own no matter where it was thrown. The spear whose power increased the farther it was thrown, the «Treason Piercer»...

"Why?"

"...?"

The one who asked was Pendragon's right hand, Granaury.

She seldom spoke on her own initiative. Without stopping her, Pendragon glanced at his right hand.

"The way you look is truly fortunate/unfortunate... It brings back too many memories. Why is Liz not by your side?"

"—Because Long destroyed her. You know that, right?"

Most certainly, this was not the answer she wanted to hear, but he had no choice but to answer so.

"Then why..."

She originally wanted to continue but fell silent halfway. Pendragon scratched his head and used the back of his left hand to tap the blade on his right. With eyes as calm as a father gazing at his child, he said:

"Say it now if you have something you want said. You might not get another chance ever again."

Granaury could be heard sighing. She seldom expressed her emotions, but the superintendent knew that she not actually emotionless. This was only natural, because he used to spend quite a lot of time with her—They could be considered old friends.

Hence, he knew her voice carried sorrow.

"So why... *was I not there?*"

The superintendent closed his eyes forcefully first.

Then he answered:

"—Because you're not Liz."

Likewise, this was not the correct answer, but he had no choice but to answer so.

"True. But we are both spears."

"Yes."

"Would you believe me if I said I was always jealous of Liz?"

"If you want me to believe."

"What a sly/honest man..."

Another sigh.

"The one by your side is not me. However, there once existed the possibility of me by your side. Together with Liz. Or replacing Liz. Clearly I could have been by your side, but was not by your side. This contradiction shook the contradiction that is me."

"I don't quite... understand."

Pendragon slowly raised his right hand, allowing the superintendent's reflection to show on Granaury's blade. This was surely akin to having her gaze squarely at the superintendent.

"Why were you unable to defeat Long before Liz was destroyed?"

"Because he was very strong."

"Also because, compared to surpassing Long's strength, you were always thinking about Liz's curse, weren't you?"

Liz's curse caused her to pierce her owner. It troubled her the whole time, making her cry. Indeed. Back then, long ago, compared to the strong opponent, he was already trembling at the premonition of separating from her.

Without changing her tone, Granaury continued:

"Why did you not defeat Long after Liz was destroyed?"

"Because I lost the reason to do so."

"Also because you followed the simple temptation of despair and fled, didn't you?"

By the time he woke up after Liz pierced his chest as a result of the curse exceeding its limit, everything was over. Left with only scars and emptiness in his heart without the slightest will to fight, he had deserted the Draconians. The

only fragment lingering in his heart was the wish to see Liz again. That was the only purpose he lived for.

"Had you neither fled nor lost, and defeated Long, the future/past would have been different. Hence, hence, I—"

The blade on Pendragon's right hand glittered brightly.

"—*hate your state of weakness.*"

The superintendent gasped.

Then in a fully philosophical tone of voice, he laughed.

"Hahaha! Indeed, my state of weakness has caused many people trouble, whether in the past or present. I'm so sorry."

"Please do not pretend to be strong... in this fashion. It is truly displeasing."

Strong? Weak? They remained fettered by these words. This made him feel a little sad.

Glancing at his two subordinates, the superintendent said:

"So, it looks like someone is holding a grudge against me. I'm sorry but the attacks might become very intense accordingly. I'm counting on you."

"...This is commonplace, in any case."

"After hearing things from you that needn't be said, it's the most tiring~"

In response to his subordinates' remarks, which conveyed questionable respect, he said:

"So... Looks like it's time for this conversation to end."

"Argh~ Enough, so long and boring! Granaury, I hold you responsible!"

"...I apologize/ignore. All that is required next is a one-sided victory akin to rape."

Confronted with the approaching figure of the "strongest"—

The superintendent laughed again.

No matter how perilous the situation, even if cold sweat and ominous premonitions remained, he still had to laugh.

This had nothing to do with being strong or weak.

It was the only proper way to act for an adult who wished to protect the children.

Part 10

Pendragon had no intention of backing down either.

He had a reason to move forward no matter what. No matter what he must do.

He had something he had to do.

Hence, if anyone got in his way—the only option was to eliminate them, of course. Even if they knew each other or could be described as old friends.

(However... What a nuisance.)

The opponent was definitely not strong. Simply in terms of strength, the knights in the school were definitely stronger.

However, such a hassle. Like yesterday, Ganon's Void Night Sword would neutralize all of his offensive and defensive maneuvers—forcibly leading to a "tied" result. In that unsteadily swaying manner.

Pendragon introduced changes in his movements in an attempt to disrupt her rhythm, but Zenon—as well as Sekaibashi at calculated moments—would throw knives, which were impossible to ignore. While he was dodging the knives, Ganon would recover her position.

Only time and energy were being worn away bit by bit. Although this applied to the other party as well... For Sekaibashi's team, that was precisely their goal. To prevent him from advancing, to deplete his time and energy. That was their only goal, never intending to win from the very start.

"So, what should I do...?"

"How about surrendering by going 'uwah~ I admit defeat~'? Also recording that and broadcasting it on Dragon Island. Then, oh dear, how incredible, the beautiful school physician's popularity would skyrocket from defeating Number One."

"Although I don't think it's possible, do you really want to become the Commander?"

"Of course not, too tiring."

Pendragon conversed while using his full strength to push Granaury down in a spiral motion. Taking this attack head on would surely mean disembowelment—no, understatement—it would not be surprising even if her body instantly split into top and bottom halves. However, Ganon used the blade's body to absorb the impact with finesse, even performing a side flip in the air on purpose to dissipate the fist's force. Just as Pendragon was going to follow up his attack at the moment of her landing, Zenon and Sekaibashi threw countless knives, containing his movements.

(Tsk...)

Ganon's Void Night Sword was not a technique that could persist forever, after all. Despite looking relaxed in motion, that was only on the surface—requiring the control, understanding and manipulation of the entire body's nerves, it consumed unimaginable stamina. Even more so if one were to take the consumption of mental energy into account. Spending the same amount of time to wave a sword randomly without thinking would probably be much less taxing.

She was going to tire out, but with Sekaibashi and Zenon's support, she had already established a routine to recover her energy through momentary breaks. Her limit had yet to arrive.

Pendragon discovered that her technique had become more refined compared to yesterday. Deadly battles were more effective than any sort of training. Through yesterday's combat, she had recalled old memories then progressed further—What a waste of talent. This meant that Long's discerning eye had picked the right successor, didn't he?

In the end—

(Right now... she has achieved perfect balance to become a perfect master of the Void Night Sword. Without disrupting her degree of perfection, it's probably impossible for me to surpass her Void Night Sword.)

He admitted it, but this was absolutely no declaration of defeat. Of course. From the very start, his mind had not considered this a battle—It was more like an annoying cleaning task. Something dirty was in his way. Without scrubbing it away, there was no way to advance to the next destination.

(So, I just need to disrupt the balance from her degree of perfection. Let's see what can be taken away, or perhaps...)



This time, he unleashed a barrage of attacks, prioritizing speed instead of power. Ganon blocked this wave as though dancing.

"How like a dance. I'd gladly take you out tonight if you'll let me."

"What a tiring invitation... Max-kun, please save such words for the young women you ilke."

"Oh? But I don't dislike you."

"Oh really? But I find it hard to accept a flirty guy like you, Max-kun. Not my cup of tea."

"You like older men who give off airs of stability and maturity, right?"

"You know me too well."

Even while chatting like this, the precision of her movements remained unchanged, unshaken at all.

Ganon was currently strong and stable in mind. Trying to take away from that might be challenging. In that case—

(Or perhaps... *Something extra could be added.*)

This was very simple.

Exceedingly simple indeed.

The superintendent watched as Pendragon charged forward recklessly. He made a thrust with Granaury's blade on the back of his hand, but Ganon blocked him with her sword.

Up to now, things were the same as before, except—

"...!"

Ganon showed alarm on her face in a rare display. Pendragon's fist, in other words, Granaury's blade, caught Ganon's sword and applied a vector to it—towards his own neck.

Confronted with this unexpected development, Ganon froze for merely an instant. She definitely could kill Pendragon if the sword continued its thrust. This was precisely Pendragon's goal in redirecting her sword.

However, she resisted. Without a choice, she resisted.

In stark contrast to the Void Night Sword's naturalness—Unnaturalness.

That instant was an opening.

And Maximilian Pendragon was a man nowhere naive enough to miss this opening.

"Having fought for so long, I'd notice no matter how oblivious... You don't seriously want to kill me from the bottom of your heart. For the unprincipled Void Night Sword whose characteristic is split-second adaptability—You can't hold on to this kind of principle."

Using the instant when Ganon's body froze, Pendragon flipped his right arm. At the same time, Granaury's blade retracted slightly while in contact with Ganon's sword—Just by doing that, the sword, which seemed stuck to Ganon's hand until now, was blown away.

"Ganon-kun!"

The superintendent had no time to consider consequences. The feeling of tendons twisting. The feeling of muscles screaming in pain. Ignoring these feelings, he did everything he could to drive his limbs to throw the knives in his hands. Like how he had killed countless foes in the past—Mercilessly, raising speed and power to the maximum, he threw by pulling all the stops. Presumably seeing her

elder sister in crisis, Zenon also threw as many knives as she could at the same time.

Zenon's knives descended upon Pendragon like a rainstorm that was blown horizontally by the wind. Pendragon had the left side of his body towards them, hence Riko could concentrate her armor on the left side for defense. After merely a millisecond's delay, the superintendent's knife flew over—but did not touch Pendragon.

The knife flew past his feet.

Striking the hilt of an earlier knife that was embedded in the ground, it bounced up.

As though reflected, it bounced upwards.

The knife flew towards where the armor was relatively thin due to defending against Zenon's rain of knives—the right side of Pendragon's body.

Stab him. Strike him. At least make him move. Even dodging would be good. In any case, if he could be prevented from delivering a lethal blow to Ganon—

But just at that moment, the superintendent saw snow-white skin behind Pendragon.

"What...!?"

Originally on Pendragon's right hand, Grananury instantly took human form.

She struck down the superintendent's knife flying from a dead angle.

A naked body of snow-white complexion. Seen so few times that one could count them out, her eyes, always partially closed—They look like they were pitying something.

"By the way, people all say that I've become a gentleman the more I aged, contrary to all expectation. They even say that I'm beginning to resemble Long, despite having no blood relation. So..."

Unfazed by the absence of Granaury's blade, Pendragon still drew his right arm back.

Towards Ganon in front of him, laughing as though he wanted to say "ridiculous":

"A man like me not your cup of tea? Stop lying."

As though resigning, Ganon suddenly relaxed her tense expression and said:

"You realized it?"

In the next second, the fist descended, sending her body flying away like a puppet.

Next—The result was easily predicted.

Earlier, they had barely maintained balance in something of a miracle. Once one corner collapsed, opposing the "strongest" was no longer possible.

His entire body in abject pain, collapsed on the ground, the superintendent turned his face. This was already his limit. He could not even lift a finger. Overexerting himself to mobilize his muscles, nerves and tendons... Everything was screaming, halted in activity. In other words, dead. I guess I'll have to spend my days in a wheelchair like the Dominion Lord for a while—Assuming I survive this.

Ganon was completely buried in a wall. Having spat out blood, there was a patch of bright red on her chest—to the point that it was a miracle that a massive hole had not opened up on her body. But definitely, she must have broken many bones with damage to internal organs. Of course, she was also unconscious. Strands of her hair looked like they were shaking slightly. Hopefully, she was still breathing—As long as this was not an illusion born out of his optimism.

Zenon was lying sprawled nearby, her right elbow twisted in a strange direction. Scattered and glittering in her surroundings were the broken fragments of

throwing knives. Groaning on the ground, she was probably trying her utmost to get up. There were heartrending bloodstains on her limbs and face.

The superintendent gulped and applied force through his convulsing throat.

"Zenon-kun, it would be best not to strain yourself."

"Un... acceptable."

"Enough. By this point, both of you have done more than enough for me."

By this point. Did she realize the hidden meaning in these words? Not only the battle here at school, but also starting from their Draconian days as well as after deserting the organization.

He was thinking, how fortunate to have them willing to follow a broken man like him.

"Clearly I was never able to reward you."

"...If there really was no reward, I would not have... retracted the resignation letter I almost handed over on many occasions."

"You don't mean... salary, right?"

"Must I really spell it out?"

"...Sorry."

Listening to Zenon's sulking voice, the superintendent smiled wryly. Just doing so made his throat hurt badly and caused trouble in breathing—It was already pointless, so he took off his gas mask.

Then within his unobscured view, he gazed at the slowly approaching figure.

"Hello, long time no see."

"Hello there, it's been forever."

Maximilian Pendragon. Or perhaps, just plain Pendragon.

As though declaring things were "over"—with a completely naked young girl clinging to his shoulder and Granaury waiting by his side with her massive wobbling bust.

"I admit my defeat. I guess someone who retired shouldn't try to stage a comeback to act cool. I don't care what you do with me but please show mercy to those two. They're just caught up in my foolhardiness."

"I decided a long time ago to leave good women alive as much as possible. Even a woman who fell in love with a certain someone who's not me despite knowing there would be no reward, or a woman who still can't forget a certain someone who's already passed away."

Then Pendragon closed one eye suggestively and laughed:

"Besides, they might realize my charm at the last moment and become my good companions. Possibilities are very important."

"Y-You bastard! You have absolutely no self-control at all—!"

Riko began to hammer the back of Pendragon's head. Completely unconcerned, he turned his gaze slightly and said:

"Just as you can see, as an actual believer of female supremacy, I can't oppose these two ladies. Living under their oppression every day, how tragic my life... So apparently, it's not up to me to decide your final fate."

"...May I decide?"

"Yes."

A moment later, Granaury walked over without hiding her naked body at all. She had clearly stated how she hated the superintendent's state of weakness. He was very weak indeed. Now, he was also defeated.

"St...op...!"

Zenon's voice called out. He deliberately avoided looking in her direction.

No matter what his final fate—He would only accept it willingly. That was enough to satisfy him. Having driven this body past its limits until it could move no longer, assuming Zenon and Ganon were not going to be killed, he had no regrets anymore.

(I've done... everything I could. We must have bought at least some amount of time... I'm sorry, but the rest will have to be entrusted to them...)

Her hand—belonging to one whose true nature was a spear, in other words, a hand that could easily pierce human flesh—grabbed his collar.

"...'Coward.' Indeed, that was what others used to call you."

With force almost enough to rip his collar off, she pulled his face towards her—

Then—

Her lips were pressed upon his lips.

"!?"

A soft sensation. The caress of breaths. The wriggling of tongues.

A moment later, when she moved her lips away—their saliva could be seen adhering to her tongue.

"It would be too cowardly if you had done this on purpose."

"...?"

"I intended to kill you but I changed my mind. When you showed me... these."

She stroked his face with her fingers, stroking the tattoo of the dragon eye that was supposed to be on his cheek.

"This Dragon Wound, this hair, this nose, and these eyes... Why did you bare them only now? Excessively unchanged, excessively nostalgic. And those feelings are screaming that killing you would be such a shame, hence—"

"Hence?"

"Hence, I shall claim you as my trophy."

An urge to laugh flowed into his heart. His entire body almost became drained of strength.

She was very strong. He was very weak. Had he already become hers?

"The right to refuse... Denied?"

"Indeed. It would trouble me greatly if you died."

She separated from him and stood up.

Then looking down at him with those rarely revealed eyes, she said with an even rarer smile:

"Because I love/hate you from the bottom of my heart."

Contradictory words spoken by the spear that embraced contradiction, they were quite incomprehensible yet very easy to understand at the same time. This was very contradictory too.

"Haha," the superintendent laughed in a hoarse voice. As soon as he laughed, his entire body lost strength. Slipping, he lost balance and his back struck the ground. His eyelids felt so heavy too. No matter how hard he tried to keep them open, all he could see was the sky.

"So—time to do what needs to be done."

This voice was heard together with receding footsteps.

"...Having agreed to let me decide, have you any objections? Master."

"Haha~ None at all."

"I'm so angry that only Granaury gets to be satisfied! Hey Maximilian, I believe it's the right time to reward me for working hard! In other words, umm, give a the same sense of satisfaction!"

"Yes yes, a kiss, right?"

"Now isn't the time for that sort of behavior, is it?"

"Muununu, hey! Granaury, don't get in my way! You big-boobed monster!"

The victors gradually left in a noisy departure.

Nearby, Zenon could be heard murmuring:

"...Philanderer. This is one more item that needs to be reported to Liz."

Carrying all sorts of meanings.

The superintendent muttered in reply: "Give me a break."

Part 11

"Huff... Huff...!"

The panting still had not subsided. Haruaki hammered his fist against his trembling knee cap in condemnation. Now was not the time to stop moving.

Due to Satsuko's giant slash attacks and Fourteen's projectiles, the asphalt underfoot was rendered unrecognizable. One could easily trip in a single moment of carelessness. And tripping under the current circumstances—could easily mean immediate death.

"Haruaki, take a break first!"

Fear used her limbs to block the bricks flying from Fourteen like stray gunfire. Although Fear was not human, the objects thrown by Fourteen were strengthened

by cursed power after all. Deflecting attacks with her limbs could not persist without injuries. She was covered in bloody scratches. This heartrending sight made Haruaki gnash his teeth.

Konoha and Kotetsu were attacking relentlessly but Satsuko and Fourteen's speed was overwhelming. A back and forth battle of three dimensions which they had never handled before, fought with high-speed tacit understanding and coordination faster than Haruaki's naked eye could follow.

Midair, Satsuko emerged from under Fourteen's cape to conduct a surprise attack. Kotetsu dodged the attack but was struck by a broom that Fourteen took the opportunity to fire, causing him to fall, hitting the ground upside down. A new depression was created in the asphalt. Konoha tried to ambush Satsuko on the school building's outer wall from behind, but her barehanded chop was absorbed by «Karma Speed». Just as she bit her lip and tried to grab Satsuko's body, Fourteen immediately shot dishes from a blind spot.

"Mode: «Cushioning Munemori»!"

Half of the dishes were blocked by Kuroe's hair but the remainder passed between the strands of hair to strike Konoha's shoulder. Konoha frowned and lost balance. Satsuko swung «Karma Speed» but Kirika extended Chupacabra Bandage to restrain her. The white bandage was sliced into shreds, fluttering in the air. Then—

"Oh, Konoha-san's attack just now allowed Satsuko to finish charging up—Karma!"

"Tsk—!"

The giant slash flew towards Konoha who had lost balance and was falling down. Unable to dodge completely, Konoha used a barehanded chop to strike the unavoidable portion of the attack... However, the gap in power was too great. She flew away diagonally, smashing into a window on the first floor of the school building.

"Konoha!"

"I-I am fine... Probably..."

Despite the many pieces of glass fragments falling from her body, Konoha immediately returned to position. Surely she was wounded, but she shook her head lightly. As though absolutely refusing to show any weakness, she glared resolutely at Satsuko and Fourteen.

Haruaki caught his breath while discreetly checking out his companions' appearances.

No one was unscathed, whether Fear, Konoha, Kotetsu or Kuroe. As for Kirika, who had just healed from getting struck in the shoulder by a projectile, Haruaki could not say for certain whether she was unscathed or not.

Everyone was panting. Muscles stiff, they stared at the formidable foes before them.

Satsuko and Fourteen. «Karma Speed»—Just by obtaining such a slender sword, they had changed, becoming so strong that they had far surpassed their former selves in previous fights.

"Hey Cow Tits! Is there no way to break the stalemate!?"

"I would have done it if there were. Please think a little... Naturally, it has to be a solution that does not include you joining the fray!"

At this rate, the tide would surely turn against them. Haruaki looked around him. A way to break the stalemate, was there one? Something they could use. Information beneficial to them.

He discovered that there was one thing that had improved compared to earlier.

"But... look, while we've been fighting, all the students seem to have gone home after school..."

"Oh, that's right. Is the student who just left the shoe lockers over there the last one?"

Kuroe glanced at the shoe lockers and commented. Kirika nodded lightly.

"...So we don't have to obediently play with them anymore, right? There's no need to heed their absolutely ridiculous threat, so let's just do what's necessary to move on—"

"Oh my~ Really~?"

Satsuko's confident voice interrupted Kirika. She and Fourteen landed lightly on the ground simultaneously.

"Then Satsuko can finally go all-out?"

"What...?"

"Satsuko has been enduring, rather, Satsuko thinks that having clearly explained to have no wish to take hostages, but turning out to take hostages in the end, that would look really bad~ Although Satsuko is very troubled by the possibility of you people escaping, conversely, there's no need to worry about getting others caught up... Yes, we will work our hardest to prevent them from escaping, Fourt!"

"Yes. Mayhem permitted—«Geist»!"

More than previously, ominous blue ghostlights moved at high speed in complicated patterns, blinking and flashing to produce an afterimage like a magic circle. The movements of these ghostlights felt rather familiar.

Then from the center of the magic circle, a certain object slowly emerged.

Gigantic and stout, with enough mass to flatten everything—A pillar.

"Meaning you can use it on us without reserve now that there are no hostages!?"

"Damn it! Be careful, everyone!"

Faced with the giant pillar's overwhelming pressure, Haruaki's group all tensed their bodies. What to do? That sort of thing was impossible to block. They could

only dodge. But given their long and narrow location, would they be able to evade that enormous thing completely—?

But just at that moment, Haruaki saw Satsuko's eyebrow twitch once, her gaze directed somewhere behind them.

Haruaki looked back—and was struck by dizziness coming from the depths of his brain.

Behind them, walking out leisurely from the courtyard behind the connecting corridor was—

"Pendragon...!"

"Ohoh~ What an intense battlefield here."

It was none other than the Commander of the Draconians. Wrapped around and walking beside him respectively, Riko and Granaury were inexplicably naked. What the heck!? As much as Haruaki wanted to exclaim at the absurdity, now was not the time.

They were caught on both sides, with Satsuko and Fourteen in front and Pendragon behind.

A despairing situation.

"...Satsuko, what now? It's the Commander."

"Wa~ But the pillar's summoning can't be stopped now, right? And since it's the Commander, there's no need to worry about getting him caught up in it. Just attack."

"Understood."

Without giving them time to think of countermeasures, Fourteen's summoned pillar flew straight at them. This was Fourteen's most powerful attack, which they had previously experienced in a past battle. A trump card that surpassed the level of cannons to approach that of siege weaponry.

Haruaki was about to jump away when he tripped over the uneven surface of the cracked asphalt ground.

"...!"

Then he fell on the ground. His entire body shivered. He understood that this momentary misstep—was enough to be *fatal*.

"Haruaki!"

"Haruaki-kun!"

Before he could even shout "Don't come over," Fear and Konoha had already rushed over to pick him up in their arms, using their bodies to shield him. Kotetsu clicked his tongue while turning around to ready his tiger claws. Kuroe and Kirika also stopped running away and switched to postures for blocking the pillar—Despite the fact that it was totally impossible to block!

By this time, Fourteen's launched pillar was already fast approaching, impossible to evade—

(Wait...!)

Then there was massive crash that seemed to shatter the earth and the sky.

No pain. No pressure. If anything, all Harauki felt was the warmth and weight from Fear and Konoha's bodies lying on top of him.

Conversely, he could feel pebbles falling on his body in a clatter—Pebbles?

Greatly perplexed by this turn of events, Haruaki opened his eyes—

And was greeted by a completely unexpected sight.

"Hmm, I never thought the simple act of destroying something could be this fun."

Milky-white armor and a spear blade on the right fist. Pendragon had entered complete combat readiness—

Against the giant pillar flying head on, he punched straight.

With a large depression where it was making contact with his right fist and Granaury, the giant pillar stood still in the air. Who knew how Pendragon had exerted his force, but the giant pillar's cracks slowly expanded while the shower of stone fragments increased more and more—

Finally, the giant pillar shattered completely.

"What...!?"

Haruaki's group could only react dumbstruck with their mouths gaping open. Why did Pendragon save them? Perhaps he was worried about Kuroe but even so, all he needed to do was pick her up and escape. Satsuko and Fourteen also seemed equally unable to understand his behavior. Staring in shock, Satsuko turned her face to the side and said:

"So, what do you want, Maximilian?"

"No matter what I want, I hope to end this as quickly as possible. Because the spoils of victory are waiting for me."

"Ahhh~ Got it. You guys be quiet now, this is very important."

After shaking his fist to fling away fragments from the giant pillar, Pendragon turned around and walked towards them in an unguarded manner. Haruaki's group frantically stood up and regrouped. Fear and the girls tensed their nerves.

However, Pendragon's target was only one person. "As expected," one could say? He made a beeline for Kuroe.

"Ohoh~ I guess I expected this, but I'm the target... Right?"

Saying that, Kuroe was just about to retreat backwards when Pendragon stopped walking before he got into the risky range where he could attack—

Suddenly, he knelt down on the spot.

As Kuroe tilted her head in puzzlement, Pendragon even reached into his armor to take out something.

A rose.

Kneeling like a knight, with an expression that could not be more serious, he presented the rose to Kuroe.

Then in a solemn voice, he said:

"Ningyohara Kuroe, I've fallen for you. Become my woman."

Satsuko, Fourteen, and even Riko and Granaury...

Apart from Pendragon himself, everyone present simultaneously exclaimed in surprise.

"...What?"

"W-W... What? What is he talking about?"

"This must be some kind of ploy! We're not falling for it!"

Haruaki's group was plunged into chaos.

But only Kuroe and Pendragon were staring at each other, exuding surprisingly serious vibes. Intimidated by their aura—Haruaki and the others stopped talking and simply watched developments unfold.

Kuroe's face was calm. It was hard to tell if the slight curl in her lips was a smile or some other emotion.

"Hoho, a rose huh... How cliched."

"Don't roses need to be given when confessing to a woman? I went out of my way to buy one."

"I don't really want to say this, but aren't you just after my abilities?"

"I admit that before, I only wanted you in order to get stronger, but it's different now. I, Maximilian Pendragon, hereby swear as a man that I now hold genuine feelings for you."

"Oh~ Then tell me what aspects about me you're in love with?"

"First of all, the initial trigger—that's your dazzling willpower, the commitment to taking your own life while smiling to the very end. That is precisely strength. To me, it is extremely dazzling strength."

Then Pendragon smiled boldly and said:

"There's a lot more. I'm the type who discovers even more good points and things to like after falling for a woman. I like your lustrous hair, I like your unfathomable eyes, I like your tender baby-like skin, I like your cute little arms and legs, and I also like your mumbling voice."

"Hmm, a lolicon huh?"

"I remember I've mentioned before, haven't I? My strike zone is extremely wide."

Kuroe giggled. After a few seconds—

With increased seriousness in her voice, she asked:

"Do you still remember what I said?"

"Yes, you want freedom—Right? Of course, I will respect you as much as feasibly possible. But even so, once you're with me, there will be some changes, probably. I might also force you to do certain things. Hence, I can only say this."

Gazing at Kuroe, Pendragon lowered his face.

In other words, he bowed his head vulnerably—

"...Please, give me a portion of your freedom."

After a long, a very long silence...

Kuroe's tiny hand lightly took the rose presented to her by Pendragon.

"...When you want to make a girl yours, the first thing you ought to do is to express your feelings. Yes, you finally took the first step."

Pendragon looked up again.

"You said—you don't dislike me, right? Then what's your reply?"

"Slow down, don't be so impatient, things are just finally beginning... The way I see it, that's right, I need to seriously consider for a while."

This time, Kuroe made a gentle smile distinctly.

Pendragon also breathed out through his nose.

"I hope you won't make me too anxious. What a bad girl you are, making men impatient... Although I don't dislike that."

"If the number of roses was a hundred instead of one, things might be different, you know?"

Kuroe waved the rose lightly and said in a joking tone of voice.

"Man, what an oversight. I was thinking if I carried too many, they'd only end up getting snapped in a fight."

"If you're willing to do other things to make up for the missing ninety-nine roses, my answer might come a little faster."

"Oh~? What an attractive proposal. Then how about I play with the hassling children on your behalf? Will something trivial like that count?"

"More than enough."

Pendragon straightened his knees and stood up, then turned his body's direction.

Towards Satsuko and Fourteen.

"Uwah~ I'm not motivated at all, and giving roses is unbelievable."

"Fighting for someone else's love... What an exciting/demoralizing development, master."

"Stop complaining, I won't forget to let you two enjoy yourselves to your hearts' content."

Kuroe turned to her stunned companions and said:

"So, looks like we don't need to fight Sacchi anymore. Let's go."

"U-Uh, that's wonderful..."

However, Haruaki still felt troubled. He turned his neck to examine them. Staring intently at each other were Pendragon and Satsuko. Pendragon's face was showing full confidence whereas Satsuko and Fourteen, who knew his power level, of course, were making expressions of maximum concentration—In other words, they were not paying attention to Haruaki's group at all. It seemed possible to run past them right now.

"Yachi, anyway, let's make use of this situation. We don't have time after all."

"Indeed, I concur. Now is not the time for fighting unnecessary opponents."

"Let's go, Haruaki, do it now!"

This time, Haruaki took care not to trip on the asphalt ground that was torn open, while passing by the Draconians who were facing off. Satsuko and Fourteen did not cause them any more trouble.

Although they had escaped the threat posed by Satsuko and Fourteen for now, Haruaki somehow felt that another huge problem had risen in its place. Because he could not ignore it, Haruaki felt compelled to ask:

"Kuroe, i-is it really okay...?"

"Yeah, since he's serious, I have to think over it seriously too. Besides, I don't dislike a wild man either."

Running while showing her usual air of aloofness, Kuroe grinned and laughed:

"It's just that the person who fell in love with me happens to be the world's strongest man, right? Nothing more to it."

Only after confirming they had run away did Pendragon speak:

"So... Although it's just for a moment, I did see your way of fighting. I can't call you Squishy-ko anymore."

"Eh? Uh, umm, what do you mean by that?"

"«Tailender Syndrome»—Ontenzaki Satsuko. As minimum courtesy, one has to understand your nickname properly. After obtaining an excellent weapon, your strength level has risen dramatically, reaching the level of the «High Singles»... Coincidentally, Nirushaaki is no longer around, so I can promote you to «Wings», which is quite fitting for your fighting style of jumping around."

"U-Unbelievably, the same as Nirushaaki-sama, Satsuko doesn't dare... Uh, thank you, Commander."

After some fidgeting, Satsuko looked up.

"Umm, Satsuko has one favor to ask, by the way. Although someone weak like Satsuko has no right to ask."

"Ask ahead."

"Commander, since you're praising me of having «High Singles» level... Can Satsuko have permission? Let Satsuko get carried away and try to set the target to be surpassing you, Commander?"

She was smiling. As usual, smiling cowardly. An unshackled smile. An insane smile. Ahhh, perhaps she was actually the genuine Draconian.

"Biting reflexively when delicious food is set before our eyes. That is very much our style. Making such a suggestion is only natural... No need to seek my permission. But in that case, this rare opportunity to bestow the «Wings» upon you will be lost before you even get tattooed."

"Eh!? A-As expected, issuing such a farfetched challenge means the promotion has to be withdrawn as punishment?"

"No no, there are two implications here. One is if you defeat me, then you'll gain the «Head» that is tattooed on my chest, not the «Wings»—"

As though opposing her—

Pendragon grinned as he spoke, taking a step forward.

"Secondly, you won't be able to get any tattoo at all if you lose to me. After fighting me when I'm cutting loose, what do you fancy your chances of survival to be?"

Part 12

Then—Haruaki's team arrived at the sports ground.

Tents of different sizes were arranged on the sports ground. It looked like a camping site.

The first unusual situation they saw was on the far side—the place reaching the sports ground if circling around the school building.

"Un Izoey!"

She was fighting in close quarters against four or five knights. Reflexively, Haruaki wanted to run over to her—But instantly, he seemed to see her make a chin raising motion. It felt like she was trying to convey something to them through her gaze.

"Meaning we should do what we're supposed to do?"

"...Yeah, after all, she spent so much effort to stall those guys for our sake."

There was less than an hour until the time limit of 2pm. They had to pick up the pace.

The group ran into the sports ground. Several knights attacked them but their fighting style was much simpler compared to Satsuko and Fourteen just now. Although their durability made things difficult to some extent, Konoha and Kotetsu still managed to render them incapable of fighting for now.

"I thought there'd be more knights waiting for us, but didn't expect so few...!"

Kirika nodded and said:

"If you think about it calmly, we've defeated many knights so far. Un Izoey must have taken out quite a few along the way here and she's holding those guys back right now... Also just now..."

"...Satsuko also eliminated many people. Looks like... Quite a lot."

Fear narrowed her eyes and spoke quietly. Haruaki recalled how Satsuko and Fourteen were attacking dead knights as if it was just a way to kill time. The knights still deserved pity despite being enemies.

Haruaki glanced at Fear to inspect her expression. She looked quite calm, but was that really the case? After seeing dead bodies, was she really unshaken? Was there any unease in her heart? Although he had many things he wanted to ask, there was no time at the moment.

The target tent was obvious at a glance. That tent was clearly much bigger, more magnificent, and its fabric was very high-class. Also—

Sleif was standing sternly at the tent's entrance.

"Sleif...!"

"That name is incorrect. How it pains me for stinking Wathes to address me by this sloppily selected name. My true name is Dainsleif."

Haruaki smiled deliberately.

"But clearly you were the one who introduced yourself with that name."

"I never expected this hassle with your group to persist until now. Would you introduce yourself seriously to a gutter rat on the road side?"

Her shoulders shook lightly.

"...What a revolting embarrassment, a miscalculation... Nauseating. Who could have expected you loathsome lot to advance all the way."

"We're not going to let you guys do as you please. Step aside. We won't allow 'Dominionization' to succeed."

Sleif—or more accurately, Dainsleif—looked up lightly under her visor-like helmet.

"Your objective is «Dieu le veut» after all? Foolish."

"What's so foolish, you idiot? You're the fool. Looks like you don't even have comrades to rely on now?"

Fear was right. Now that no knights had shown up as reinforcements, it meant that there were no more knights remaining. She had sent out all manpower. Or perhaps all the knights were no longer capable of fighting. Hence, were the knights currently fighting Un Izoey the last of them?

This left only this girl and the elderly Dominion Lord.

Two people. Just two people, that was all.

In that case, it should be possible to stop them. Dainsleif had lost «Karma Speed». No matter how strong she was, she could not possibly be stronger than Pendragon. They probably did not have the same tacit understanding and

coordination as Satsuko and Fourteen to run circles around them. It should be possible to stop them—

Relief was causing an uplifting feeling to surge from the depths of Haruaki's chest. This infectious feeling was probably spreading to his teammates who entered combat stances with vigor in their eyes. No need to hesitate, all they needed to do was move forward now—

Nevertheless—

Dainsleif went "hmph" in mockery then answered Fear's assertion:

"Oh? Do you really believe that?"

"What...?"

Dainsleif immediately extended her arm horizontally—

"The Lord has commanded, this view-obstructing tent is no longer needed once you lot arrived. Don't bore the Lord, go on and finish acting out the final scene in joy!"

Using her bare hand, Dainsleif sliced the tense supporting rope in front of the tent. Then lifting her leg lightly, she sliced another supporting rope.

A strong gust of wind happened to blow, greatly flipping up the tent that had been liberated from its restraints. Starting from the front half whose supporting ropes had been severed by Dainsleif, the tent flew back as though being peeled off—

Hence, the tent's interior was presented before their eyes. Support columns left empty in their place. Tables with vases. Neat rows of armor as decorations. A long red carpet. At one end of the carpet was a platform one level higher than the ground, with something resembling a throne. No—Not resembling.

It was a throne.

Chin resting on his hand while sitting in his wheelchair, Dominion Lord Trinac Agana was there, his deep-set eyes staring at them. Haruaki saw Fear hold her

breath, but she immediately bit her lip and returned the Dominion Lord's gaze with determination.

A spear was embedded in the wheelchair. According to Un Izoey, this was Zilch Ground—the "mobile territory" prepared to circumvent the curse of "dying as soon as one exited the territory." A different spear—next to the throne, within the Dominion Lord's reach, another spear was planted in the ground.

That was «Dieu le veut»—the spear which had harmed Kirika's body, using her fresh blood to stain these lands in preparation for this town's "Dominionization."

The object they needed to destroy.

It was already in sight, available for their taking once the female knight, whose true nature was a cursed sword, and the elderly man were defeated.

Once they were defeated, everything could go back to normal.

The Yachi home as usual. The school as usual. Daily life as usual.

(Great, it'll be soon. Success is really almost here...!)

Feeling impatient, Haruaki could not help but take a step forward.

However, he saw Dainsleif shrug.

"How pitifully shallow—Precisely the spinal reflexes of a gutter rat's. Even if it is a trap, your eyes can only see the bait inside."

"What...?"

"Your eyes are worse than the blind's. *The knights guarding the Lord are right here.*"

Here? Where?

There were no signs of anyone apart from the Dominion Lord and Sleif in this place, the original location of the tent.

No—Considering humanoid objects, there were some.

The gloomy silver armor placed at the entrance and along the two sides of the red carpet. Each set of armor was standing motionlessly with a sword resting vertically on the ground in front of them, held in both hands. Immobile decorations. They should be decorations—

"Please issue the command, my lord."

"Yes. Awaken—«Wittelsbach Knights»!"

Instantly—

With impeccable motions, the two rows of armor simultaneously raised their fists to their chests.

The clanging sounds from the armor were superimposed. Haruaki's group stared wide-eyed.

"No way...!"

"These are not humans, right? I sense no presence."

Kotetsu frowned and groaned.

"Speaking of which, are these sets of cursed armor? Absolutely ridiculous...!"

"Your brains are absolutely ridiculous. This is the most ancient and illustrious knightly order. An order of royal guards who only mobilize on command. The curse consists of sixteen dead knights. In other words—A cursed chivalric order."

The sets of armor grated as they moved, then even proceeded to walk, raising their silver broadswords and adjusting to an overhand grip while their helmets shook with ominous metallic sounds.

"I've never heard of that kind of curse...!"

"A foolish query—A curse is an acute poison defiling all concepts. There exists nothing in this world that cannot be cursed."

The Dominion Lord answered Haruaki while watching the sets of armor slowly enter formation. Then as though to pass time, he started to explain the origins of the «Wittelsbach Knights».

Reportedly, they were the tragic result of the courageous chivalric order who had fought in a last stand to defend the throne room during a certain small nation's demise. Locking themselves in the throne room to defend their king, they waited for reinforcement. During this time, the enemy army outside the door kept assaulting them psychologically in various ways. Killing, violating the wives or children of the knights, making them listen to the screams of their loved ones. For the sake of their king, the knights kept enduring and held their position for a very long time. But actually, the king was already assassinated in the back room. Everything was a sham perpetuated by the enemy nation in order to toy with them for amusement. In the end, the knights walked out of the main door, laughing madly while cursing everything in the world. Then they fought to the death as martyrs.

"They feel neither pain nor fear, because they are the knights who fought until death, simply following their king's orders foolishly. Having become their lord, by royal authority I have commanded them to 'take action in accordance with hatred against Wathes.' So long as this royal decree stands, they will always follow my orders. That being said, should I lose my status as king, in that very instant, they will probably attempt to kill me as a result of the curse."

While the Dominion Lor was speaking, the sets of silver armor finished entering formation. Then raising their silver broadswords towards Haruaki's group, they took a step forward. Sixteen sets of cursed armor. Cursed knights.

Against these unexpected enemies, Konoha gritted her teeth, readied her knifehand stance, and said:

"Hmph. It has been nagging at me how surprisingly, you people rely on cursed tools so much!"

"Shut up, Wathe. Once all objectives are accomplished, I will be responsible for destroying them!"

"Truth be told, all you do is talk a good game!"

Konoha and Kotetsu engaged the first detachment of the Wittelsbach Knights. Using their arms and legs imbued with the sharpness of blades, they clashed with the armored knights' broadswords, producing loud impacts. Probably increasing in hardness after being cursed, even Konoha and Kotetsu were unable to slice through them.

With a total of sixteen enemies, it was impossible for just two people, Konoha and Kotetsu, to hold back all of them. One of the knights approached Haruaki first.

"Haruaki, hurry and retreat!"

Fear dodged the broadsword and punched the knight's helmet from below. This impact caused the part of the helmet covering the mouth to come loose—A completely desiccated skeleton could be seen underneath. Hollow eye sockets, jaws devoid of teeth. Haruaki could not help but shudder. Fear's face also twitched stiffly but now was not the time to be concerned with what lay underneath. Unleashing a kick with full force, she made the armor back away.

"Chupacabra Bandage... Damn it, so heavy!"

"I'm having a rough time too...! Although now's not the time for disheartened words!"

Kirika and Kuroe also escaped while extending their respective weapons. But compared to the armored knights' mass and pressure, their bandage and hair were far too fragile.

(Damn it... And to think we're so close...)

Behind the silver knights, Dainsleif's figure on the red carpet was gradually receding. After walking over to the side of the Dominion Lord's wheelchair, she

turned around and stood there motionlessly. Beneath the helmet, her eyes were calmly observing the situation. Haruaki could sense her pride and determination in protecting the Dominion Lord no matter what happened.

Standing between her and Haruaki's group were the sixteen deceased knights, clad in heavy armor, unable to feel pain, fear or fatigue. Let alone breaking past them to advance, simply avoiding lethal injuries was already taking full effort.

Worse of all—They were slowly getting cornered. Whether quantity or quality, the enemies were putting them under pressure.

Trying out every method they could think of, Haruaki's group still found themselves helpless.

Haruaki also had Konoha transform into a Japanese sword.

"True-Kill... Counter!"

Even a sword drawing attack from the Japanese sword failed to slice through the steel armor of the knights.

"Impossible!"

"Shallow to the point of evoking pity. Even if you are a Japanese sword cursed over many years, they are also sets of armor that were likewise cursed over many years to likewise acquire astounding power. Furthermore, now that the concept of 'I am a knight' has been fortified by 'Dominionization,' don't believe mistakenly that they can be easily sliced."

Sleif mocked from her position standing next to the wheelchair. Haruaki and Konoha backed away to catch his breath.

Although fingers were missing from his left hand, it did not affect his control of Konoha very much, just that it was still hurting a lot. The shock generated from the impact against hard armor would attack his amputation wound directly, seeping into his body through the exposed flesh, bouncing randomly inside. Haruaki gritted his teeth and deliberately ignored the pain.

"Our attacks are not entirely ineffective... As long as we keep attacking the same spot multiple times, it should be possible to defeat them, but..."

The Japanese sword shook slightly as though in worry. She was probably worried about the pain in his left hand.

Haruaki gripped her tighter to tell her "don't worry." If something so trivial as his fingers hurting would give Konoha pause, it could get problematic.

"If it works, I'm willing to try anything. But the enemy isn't giving us any time to try things at our leisure...!"

Two other knights attacked them at the same time. haruaki jumped back again. Using her full strength, Fear smashed her body against one of the knights, using the momentum to make him crash into the other, thus buying time for Haruaki and Konoha to follow up with an attack. However, Fear frowned and held her shoulder.

"H-Hey! Are you okay!?"

"Huff... Don't worry. Just a little shoulder dislocation, I've already pushed it back in."

While Fear was answering gruffly, a vigorous shout was heard. Kotetsu was locked in a scuffle with the knights. Attacking head on, mustering full force, he was engaging the most number of knights but as a result, his injuries were also the most severe. The color of blood on his body flashed in and out of view while pieces of his torn clothing dangled.

Speaking of injury, everyone present was not unscathed. Although not a lot of time had passed since the «Wittelsbach Knights» were mobilized, Haruaki's group was already all covered in wounds. This was not only due to the armored knights being too powerful but also because they had spent too much energy fighting Taciturn, Satsuko and Fourteen, as well as the other knights—

A certain ice-cold feeling silently crept up Haruaki's spine.

A feeling—one that he did not wish to notice—one that he did not wish to articulate. A premonition.

Next—

"Guuuuuuuh!"

"Class Rep!"

The splattering of fresh blood. Kirika was retreating when her legs tripped from fatigue. Chasing her closely, an armored knight made a thrust with his broadsword, piercing her abdomen.

Kuroe reacted in alarm. While extending her hair to pull Kirika's body over, she also used hardened hair as a shield to slide in front of Kirika's body. After the knight withdrew his broadsword, Kirika collapsed forward, clutching her belly. Haruaki frantically wanted to rush forward to cover her, but he was also facing the approach of armored knights which he could not ignore.

His back shivered again from a sense of chill.

(Damn it... We already got this far...)

A small voice was trying to catch his attention.

A small voice was forcing him to admit.

(The Dominion Lord is clearly over there, the spear is clearly visible over there...!)

Extremely gloomy and dark emotions were stirring in the bottom of his heart, attempting to devour all of his willpower and vitality.

(At this... rate...)

He tried his hardest not to think about the next words.

Through moving his body in a state of self-oblivion, he pushed those words away to the other side of his quickened breathing.

Haruaki did everything he could to feign ignorance of the ominous premonition climbing up his spine.

However, he had no idea how long this could last.

Part 13

Consciousness—Fuzzy.

Most likely due to excessive loss of blood, with every breath, her pierced abdomen would convulse, producing pain as though someone were stirring her insides. The sensation of flesh squirming. It felt unpleasant even though she was used to it.

"Huff... Huff...!"

Just earlier, Fourteen had also sliced off a bit of her flesh. Although immortal, her physical stamina was not limitless. Her vision blinked and flashed, her entire body was filled with fatigue, causing the pain to feel even more clear and distinct.

Sprawling, it was impossible to see the surrounding situation. Through her arm, Kirika exerted all the strength she could muster, flipping herself to lie on her back. Then all she could do was breathe repeatedly and swallow the blood flowing in reverse from the depths of her throat. There was an immoral flavor.

Hazy consciousness, blurred vision.

Suddenly, she noticed a pair of legs over her head.

Dressed in a black lab coat, the man was grinning as usual—Looking down at her. From below, she looked at the upside-down face of the man she hated the most in the entire world.

Was this guy here all along? By the way, what kind of situation was she in until just now? She could not quite remember. But since he was present now, he must have been present.

"Oh my~ What a crisis here. The «Wittelsbach Knights» eh? ...Even I didn't expect them to have this trump card up their sleeve."

"Yamimagari... Pakuaki..."

"What's up, little sister? Although you won't die, it still pains my heart to see my little sister on the verge of death... I'll save you if you ask me for help, okay?"

He narrowed his eyes mischievously, then said:

"But in return—I'll demand that you return to my side, that's all."

"Don't be... ridiculous."

Words carrying the taste of blood. A reflexive answer that could not be more natural.

However—Ahhh—

Kirika turned her blurry gaze. They were in sight. They had bled aplenty, but still fought vigorously. Blown away, falling, standing up. Wounds increasing monotonically, breathing likewise quickening monotonically—

Admit it.

This situation was despairing.

At this rate, they were going to be wiped out soon.

Even without losing their lives, once "Dominionization" finished, the result would still be the same. There was only a little time left.

That home, the meaning of its existence, everything would vanish.

The very meaning of their existence here would die.

Kirika's lips twisted as though laughing and crying.

"Like hell anyone wants... to ask for your help? What I want to talk about, is something else..."

So pathetic she was shedding tears. Towards the emptiness of the future, she wanted to laugh.

Lacking oxygen, her mind kept spinning. Her vision of them, fighting courageously in desperation, also spun haphazardly.

Inside her mind, there was only doubt. Why? Why? Why?

She did not want to do this, neither did she want to do that.

She only wanted to see smiling faces. She wanted to drink tea in leisure. She wanted to laugh together over silly little things. She wanted to enjoy delicious food. In that living room, together with him. Or together with everyone, forever and ever.

In other words, simply stated—

"I... They... only want to obtain happiness."

"This is quite a general wish again. But I believe it's very commonplace."

Her lips replied on their own. A hazy consciousness was causing her words to be fragmented.

"Indeed, we just want to obtain happiness. So, tell me how, Yamimagari Pakuaki."

"...?"

"You don't even know the answer to this kind of question? How inane... Ahhh, absolutely ridiculous..."

Seriously.

Absolutely ridiculous.

Instantly, this catchphrase lit a burning inferno in her heart, even capable of erasing the red of blood, this fiery passion flowed out of her throat, losing control.

"Tell me! Say that you know! Just like always!"

She glared at his face. Making a fist to pound the ground, she continued to shout:

"Why did things come to this? I just want to obtain happiness. Everyone just wants to obtain happiness, that's all. Try and make me... make everyone obtain happiness! Tell me, Yamimagari Pakuaki, tell me that the method is already known!"

This was childish venting, a yell of resignation. She understood this point very well. However, that was all she could do. Because this was the only impulse lingering in her dying body.

Her yelling consumed oxygen that was originally meant for breathing. So hard to breathe, her vision blurred.

Pakuaki's giggling grin—entered into view.

"I will accept these words of yours as a challenge."

Kirika felt perplexed. What did he mean?

What was he talking about?

"Hohoho, what you talked about is definitely unknown. And since it is unknown, that constitutes sufficient reason for us to take action—Doesn't it?"

On the boundary of consciousness, Kirika was struck by a question immediately—

Why was Pakuaki turning his head as though seeking an opinion from someone on the side?

Part 14

Somewhere very far away from the school—

In front of a certain room inside their rented apartment...

Alice Bivorio Basskreigh was currently on the phone with a familiar supplier. A regular conversation of information exchange akin to periodic updates. Considered a part of casual chatting, she would take the opportunity to ask how *they* were doing lately. She asked about the town where she had visited in the past.

"I see now... I understand. Thank you very much."

'I really don't want to see those Knights Dominion guys expand their influence further. It'd be a huge problem for me if business gets increasingly difficult... Here's to balance and world peace. Bravo. So long now.'

She exhaled while putting the cellphone into her pocket after the call ended. Next to her, a girl was sitting in the corridor, staring in boredom at the door in front of them.

"They seem to be in quite a crisis over there."

"That geezer's voice is too loud. I almost heard everything. How incompetent."

The girl—Nikaidou Kururi—glanced sideways at Bivorio then asked:

"So what are we gonna do?"

Bivorio closed her eyes lightly and pondered.

Her feelings towards them were complicated. She used to be their enemy and fought them. Then she realized the error of her ways. They also made her learn that her way of life was wrong. Saved by them? In one sense, probably, but in

another sense, probably not. That being said, she had no idea what they thought on this matter.

But if one were to take the perspective of being saved by them, this point was quite clear. They had saved her from imprisonment as well as the bleeding Kururi. Hence, it was at least certain that they were owed a favor. However...

Bivorio sighed. Putting aside for now what their relationship was with her group—

"Even if we hurried over there now, it would probably be too late."

"...Right. Besides, we're not obliged to run all the way there to meddle in someone else's business. Speaking of which, it's not like it matters to us whether they live or die."

Kururi muttered as though arguing.

Bivorio relaxed her expression slightly.

The supplier had told her about their current situation. The town was facing "Dominionization." The school's students were taken hostage. The Frontline Gathering Knights Dominion's Lord had arrived with a legion under his command. Fear-in-Cube was feeling frightened by her own power. Although details were scarce, the Draconians were also causing trouble to them.

Just from the description, the situation sounded extremely despairing. However—

"Don't worry."

"...?"

Whenever any member of their group came to mind, it was never in isolation. Like a chain reaction, one would naturally think of another person appearing beside them. Another person holding hands. Another person smiling together.

In other words—Them, living in the set of bonds known as "them."

"They have reliable comrades. If comrade sounds strange as a term... You can also say that they treasure the interpersonal bonds. These bonds will become their power."

"So... Can I be honest? That's super lame. It's not like this is manga aimed at teenagers."

Bivorio giggled.

"Interpersonal bonds becoming power... The same applies to us too."

"Hmph, how come I never noticed?"

"Oh my, is that really the case?"

She narrowed her eyes. In front of the two of them—what they had been gazing at all along—the door to a bedroom.

A certain traumatized family member had kept herself locked inside that door for eternity—

It slowly opened.

"Hmm? You're waiting for Elsie-san to come back? Oh my, *MAX THANK YOU* for real!"

Sent back by the Lab Chief's Nation, only reunited with Bivorio and Kururi several days prior, Elsie spoke while smiling tenderly. As for why she had entered the room like this, it was something she naturally suggested on her own initiative without anyone asking after she learned about the situation.

There was another woman behind Elsie.

Her best friend in the past was Elsie—Originally missing, later discovered to be badly wounded and protected by the Lab Chief's Nation until recently. Obediently holding hands with Elsie like a child was—

Oratorie Rabdulmunagh, the family's prided shut-in.

On her emaciated face was a smile that seemed shy, apologetic and timid at the same time.

Even so, her forceful and excessively cheery best friend still held her by the hand aggressively, taking a step out of the room just like that—

Still with a smile on her face, Bivorio said in a gentle tone of voice as though teaching her own child:

"See, Kururi? Forget about noticing or not noticing, isn't it right before your eyes?"



Part 15

And then far away, Haruaki and company were just as Bivorio described.

Looking at their power.

Accompanied by surprise.

Joy.

And a bit of nostalgia.

Chapter 6 - I, Who Am Together With Him / "Cube x Cursed x Curious"

Part 1

—Rewinding time back to a little earlier, at the Yachi home.

"Ooph..."

Yachi Honatsu was alone, diligently sweeping the garden. The second floor of the accessory dwelling, where Kuroe and formerly Konoha lived, was damaged to a tragic degree. Windows shattered, glass shards scattered all around, crushed window frames dangling, tattered curtains fluttering in the wind.

Honatsu first cleared away the glass shards, which were the most dangerous. Using a broom to sweep, he then gathered them in a dustpan and threw the glass into a flame-resistant garbage bag.

"That's about it~"

He turned his head to survey his surroundings in a circle, confirming his handiwork. At least the area in front of the accessory dwelling had been made

rather clean. Of course, he had not worked on the veranda or the interior of the house yet, which he was going to do later if there was time.

Seeing as no knights had visited again so far, it looked like they were probably in a state that lacked spare energy for attacking this home. Haruaki and company seemed to be making progress smoothly.

As for why he had left them, staying at home to sweep, he could only say "no choice." He would be of little help even if he went along with them. In that case, it would be better to get started on cleaning the house first.

"Hmm..."

Honatsu's gaze stopped at the storeroom part of the accessory dwelling. Caught in the earlier battle, the metal shutter was slightly contorted. Expending quite a bit of effort, Honatsu barely managed to raise the metal shutter.

He walked into the storeroom.

Although no earthquake had occurred, Pendragon and the knights had fought a disorderly battle all over the place. Honatsu hummed a song while broadly checking for anything out of place in the cursed objects placed either on the shelves or on the floor.

"Hmhm~ Of the slightly cursed tools... Yes, a couple of them have lifted their curse. I've got to take them out once everything is settled and replace them with new ones. The ones labeled to be returned to their owners... This one and that one~ I wonder if there are any packing materials in the house?"

Muttering quietly, he walked to the next set of shelves.

"No matter how small an object, no matter how minuscule a curse, nothing wants to be cursed after all. Because everyone here was created for the sake of helping others, more or less. Only because certain things went awry did they get covered by the negative emotions of foolish humans. It would be so sad if they were thrown away just because of that."

"Oh~" Honatsu looked at the storeroom's ceiling as though he thought of something at this moment.

"In other words—What I need to do is very simple. It's recycling. It's environmental protection, eco-friendliness. Although I just realized, I was actually a pioneer ahead of the times a long time ago, as expected of myself!"

He clapped his hands and praised himself.

"Even if slightly dirty or a little broken, they might still be usable or there might be other ways of existence. This is the resting place for the sake of slowly pondering such matters... Right?"

After muttering all alone, he cocked his head on his own as well.

"Why do I have to do this? Hmm~ If it's Haruaki, he might say that this is penance for the tools that we humans have cursed... Of course he's right but Daddy is the one who started this endeavor from day zero and I don't quite agree~ Actually, it's more like paying off debts."

He examined the next shelf then tilted his head the other way.

"Hmm~ Speaking in general terms... It's wanting to be kind? Not just towards humans but also things created by humans and things related to humans. Don't you find this to be wonderful? At least I purely think so. However, I think Haruaki also understands this point. Summing it up, it's love. Love. This home was built using our love, so plentiful that it overflows."

Honatsu nodded and walked over to the last set of shelves. At this moment, he suddenly giggled.

"By the way, I'm quite intrigued myself. Why am I muttering so much to myself? Yes, as usual, it's because of 'developments.'"

The directionality of "no choice." Something occasionally enveloping him, whispering to him, pushing him.

Something demanding that he "do this."

He called them "developments."

"By the way, let me add this, why I prioritized sweeping the accessory dwelling's surroundings is also for this reason. I was already sweeping when Haruaki and the others were here. Actually, it's probably better if I started sweeping from the main house or the living room. But just as 'developments' said, it's of course much better to wake up in clean surroundings. Although this is totally just a matter of mood."

Then Honatsu knelt down in front of those shelves.

His gaze settled on something on the lowest level. He stared straight at it.

Then he reached out and caressed gently.

"Are you worried about affecting Haruaki and the others' 'developments'? Hoho, what a kind child you are. But you're thinking too much. They will embrace you with open arms... Very naturally, matter-of-factly, unalterably. Like what those children have been doing all along. So, you don't need to be afraid."

Ahhh—Honatsu finally noticed.

Why he was here, why he came here.

"It's to help you, still half asleep, to realize your own 'developments'... In other words, my mission is to give the sleeping girl one final push."

Hence, Honatsu used just his fingertip to poke that object. It felt hard yet unbelievably warm.

"However, you don't need an alarm clock. Neither do you need a hand to shake you out of bed, nor words to rouse you, nor a spoon to whack a frying pan noisily."

He giggled.

Gently, only extremely gently—He then said:

"You just need to be aware of it... Got that? Long ago—You have already woken up."

In front of his gaze...

The indigo pot shook with a clatter.

Part 2

Haruaki could not believe the scene in front of him and blinked repeatedly. Because it was too unexpected, he had to spend a bit of time before he could recall from memory what he definitely knew.

Just as an armored knight was about to swing his broadsword upon Haruaki, something jumped from the side, baring its fangs to bite the knight's throat. It was—

A beast made of indigo mercury.

Ahhh, this... This is hers—!

Then he heard a voice. So nostalgic that it brought him to the verge of hot tears, that voice.

"Indigo Venom No.28, Name: «Unknown». Indigo Venom No.29, Name: «Uranus»!"

She looked back.

Haruaki saw it.

With hair covering one eye, dressed in a large coat with many pockets, wearing tall boots for some reason, summoning to her side the cursed forms of her venom familiars—

"A-Aiko!"

"Aiko-san!? How!?"

He was not mistaken. It was definitely Aiko. During the battle against the Bivorio Family, she had suffered a grievous wound sufficient to kill. It was only last Christmas when they discovered that she was miraculously still alive, slowly waiting to recover—the girl whose true nature was a cursed pot.

With timid airs like a small pet, Aiko retracted her neck and fidgeted shyly. Indeed it was her, exactly as Haruaki remembered.

"Yes, uh, umm, it was Honatsu..."

"—Aiko!"

In the middle of Aiko's sentence, Fear rushed over to hug her tightly. Fear's face went through myriad expressions while she rubbed her face against Aiko in one instant, or shook and stroked Aiko's body all over in the next.

"Ahhh, it really is Aiko! Why? How? When did you wake up? Are you okay? Running to this place!"

"...Hweh~"

Aiko made that nostalgic sound while allowing Fear to keep shaking her. However, her gaze suddenly turned to the side—The approaching armored knight that a newly summoned large dog-shaped venom familiar had pounced on.

"Umm, Fear... I'm very happy, but right now..."

"Y-You're right. Right now... Hmm, it's not the time."

Fear finally recovered somewhat from her confusion and released Aiko's body.

"I'm pretty lost here but you mentioned Pops' name just now? I can basically guess everything from that... Are you willing... to help us?"

"That is exactly why I came here."

An unambiguous answer. Clearly for her, using venom familiars was not supposed to be a happy thing. It was supposed to be a power that she herself hated.



Haruaki felt very grateful for her well intentions. Nodding, he said:

"Kotetsu! Those animal-like things are on our side. Don't worry!"

"Guh, oh... Hmph. Truth be told, your allies are full of weird things. I never expected the arrival of even beasts as well—"

Despite wounds all over his body, Kotetsu was still valorously fighting the armored knights with his tiger claws, muttering in a gruff tone of voice. His reply seemed a bit strange to Haruaki.

"...Even beasts as well?"

Kotetsu silently lifted his chin, gesturing towards Kirika who had her abdomen pierced by a knight's broadsword earlier. Heavily injured, she was supposed to be focusing her attention on healing at the moment. Haruaki saw—

Arriving unnoticed, Yamimagari Pakuaki was standing there, looking down at the collapsed Kirika.

Next, after a wave of his arm...

A group of people dressed in lab coats suddenly appeared in the surroundings.

Pakuaki first glanced at Kirika then Haruaki.

"No need to be so surprised. I simply used transportation and concealment Wathes."

"No, I'm not talking about that, why are you..."

"Looks like there's no time to explain reasons right now. Although brawn is not in abundance on my side, there are a few skills just sufficient to handle combat. That's the main point, right?"

"Take this! Eat my punch! As for the name... I got it! Intellectual Fist of Destruction!"

"Kususu, surprisingly good, that gorilla-like and simple-minded speech of yours. But gorillas can't speak Japanese, so overall, it still adds up to zero."

"Th-Then... Ooh, ooh, ohhhhhhh!"

"Uwah, obviously human but imitating gorilla sounds, that's so revolting. Doing that is totally retarded, so it's minus points now."

"What the heck do you want me to do!?"

A familiar looking muscular researcher equipped with brass knuckles was punching an armored knight. A gloomy woman was wielding a taming whip. Other researchers who showed up were each carrying strange tools, some resembling rods, some resembling fans, some resembling guitars. Those were definitely cursed tools that were useful in combat.

If a re-introduction was necessary, there was also one researcher present who did not carry any cursed tools.

"I am late. Apologizing with this kind of apology."

A dark-skinned figure jumped over, sending a set of silver armor flying with a kick. Most likely, she finally defeated those living knights she was fighting earlier.

"Hi. Anyway, this is the situation now. You help out too."

"Although the reason is unknown... Orders acknowledged."

After nodding at Pakuaki, Un Izoey was just about to pursue the armored knight she had just kicked away when—

Someone landed on that knight's helmet with a thud.

Haruaki could only stare wide-eyed. Because it was too unbelievable, he could not trust his own eyes.

Kokoro Pentangeli. Her hair was cut short and she was dressed in a pantsuit like a businesswoman, but unmistakably, it was the Draconian whom they had defeated in the past.

"Kaha. It's been a while, Hunter, boy... Woah!?"

The armored knight under Kokoro's feet stood up forcibly. Somersaulting in the air, she landed and casually picked up someone's sword that had fallen on the ground. After clashing a few times with the armored knight's broadsword—perhaps due to a difference in mass—her sword broke. Backing away, she picked up another sword.

"Tsk, how fragile~ But whatever, this is also a good training handicap."

"Y-You, how...?"

"Oh? You didn't hear about this? I'm now being kept by that unscrupulous and inhumane masked man. He even threatened me with poisoned food... So that's the story. Anyway, that's why I've no intention of fighting you guys at the moment."

"The superintendent?"

Indeed, they had handed Kokoro to the superintendent to take care of. Although she was a villain who had committed unforgivable crimes... Haruaki did not believe that the superintendent would execute her privately. Presumably as punishment, he forced her into becoming his subordinate.

Kuroe tilted her head slightly.

"Come to think of it, the superintendent seems to have mentioned something about a beast tamer..."

"Although I think what he said about poison was 99% likely to be a lie, I can't ignore the possibility that he really laced my food with poison. Anyway, that guy

currently holds the power to determine my life and death... Usually, he sends me to do his bidding by handling gangsters or other boring conflicts. Now that there's a rare chance for a big fight, I have to enjoy myself! Kahaha!"

Obtaining weapons from the scene, Kokoro charged the armored knight.

Haruaki then saw Kirika stir restlessly to move her upper body, so he reached out and helped her up. The abdominal wound seemed to have finally healed.

"...Absolutely ridiculous, the situation seems to have descended into chaos."

"It's way too chaotic! By the way, huh? There's even one of Sovereignty's dolls mixed in there!"

Haruaki suddenly discovered there was a doll mixed among Aiko's venom familiars, jumping around, trying to divert the armored knights' attention. Haruaki turned his head to see a figure on the school roof far away. Not just Sovereignty but Shiraho, Isuzu and the others were also there.

"They were clearly asked to hide in the secret room..."

In his hand, Konoha shook lightly.

"I understand their feelings. It's quite painful to just wait without doing anything."

"And right now, the knights probably don't have any spare energy to give them a hard time... Even if they do, Isuzu would be able to handle one or two of them using the power of norito. Anyway, let's feel grateful for Sovereignty's support, it's enough to disrupt the enemy."

"You're right."

Haruaki nodded in agreement with Fear, then readied Konoha in a stance. There was a continuous stream of slight pain from his left hand just from holding the sword. It was when clashing against armor and swords that the force of impact would bounce around inside his body, causing a vague and ambiguous numbness. This elusive pain, too small to pinpoint tangibly, actually felt more annoying.

However, staring at the battlefield before his eyes, Haruaki slowly began to ignore it. Slowly, he forgot the pain.

It felt unbelievable.

They were facing the «Wittelsbach Knights», sixteen of them, threats with mechanical vibes like robots.

Kotetsu swung his tiger claws. Kuroe extended her hair. Kirika controlled her bandage. Un Izoey brandished the knife on her foot. While the doll controlled by Sovereignty distracted the knights, Aiko's venom familiars would seize opportunities to bite. Waving around their respective tools, incomprehensible to Haruaki, the members of the Lab Chief's Nation handled the knights. On the other hand, Kokoro was swinging her sword like a beast.

Everyone was there. Enemies, friends, as well as people who were difficult to classify as enemies or friends.

Haruaki felt his heart heat up unbelievably. He thought back to all the details of everything that had happened to this date. Times they had spent—interacting, knowing, clashing with certain individuals. At the same time, he immersed himself in the feeling.

Without these times in the past, surely this currently scene would be impossible to witness. The situation would not have developed into this either.

(Sure enough... it's because of Fear, right?)

He believed that Fear was the origin. Everything started after she came here. Meeting all kinds of people, experiencing all sorts of things. To be honest, every incident had good and bad aspects to them—but thanks to her, many things were definitely put into motion.

Even so, what was waiting ahead of them was assuredly going to be "something good."

Of course, what they desired was a happy ending.

He did not want to see an ending with people crying. He did not want to see an inconsolable ending.

Power surged silently within him. Standing in front of this scene, it was only natural.

This scene, allowing him to see everyone, seemed to be saying "step forward towards the happy ending."

At this moment, gazing at the battlefield like a commander, issuing orders to the researchers, Pakuaki suddenly said to Haruaki:

"Hey hey, what are you spacing out for? We're not jocks, after all, intellectual exercise is our specialty. Although we can buy some time, things won't look pretty if you expect us to wipe out the enemy."

"Huh?"

Pakuaki extended his arm lightly and pointed somewhere.

The far end of the red carpet.

The Dominion Lord was sitting in his throne, the wheelchair. Beside him was the maiden knight—as well as the cursed spear stabbed in the ground.

"You guys have things to do, right? Then go, Yachi Haruaki."

"This guy is correct. Our goal is not the complete destruction of these sets of armor."

"...That's true."

Fear nodded with a serious demeanor. The Japanese sword in Haruaki's hand also shook lightly.

"Got it. Then excuse me, I'm leaving the rest to you!"

Saying that, Haruaki started sprinting. Kirika also followed. Kuroe, Kotetsu and Un Izoey wanted to rush over but were blocked by the armored knights. Without extra energy to spare, they had no choice but to stay where they were and continue fighting the knights.

In the end, they were the only four who broke free from being surrounded by the «Wittelsbach Knights». Haruaki, Konoha in his hand, Fear, and Kirika.

"Haruaki-kun and I will be in charge of close quarters combat. Ueno-san will take care of long-range attacks and provide treatment in case any of us are injured. Finally, the one who doesn't matter... I suppose this is the most basic lineup."

"Don't call me the one who doesn't matter, accursed Cow Tits!"

"Konoha-kun, are you going to fight in that form?" asked Kirika.

"To be honest, I also hope that Haruaki-kun could stay in a safe place."

"Let me help please. Now that we're here, how could I do nothing but watch? My hand is totally fine too."

Haruaki asserted firmly, prompting a sigh from the Japanese sword.

"Indeed, the opponent does not seem to be a target that could be handled with knifehand strikes alone... And I don't want to suddenly see a set of armor approaching Haruaki-kun from behind and swinging a sword at him after we separate to fight."

Immediately, Konoha's voice turned serious.

"I will put my life on the line to protect Haruaki-kun. Haruaki-kun, may I complete an important preparation for this purpose? However, that means changing back to human form for a moment."

The Dominion Lord and Dainsleif were right in front of them. However, since Konoha said it was an important preparation, Haruaki could not ignore her, of course.

"Of course it's okay, but since you're turning back into human form, shouldn't I close my eyes first...?"

"Oh, either way is fine. I don't mind even if you don't close your eyes. Yes, this is a good chance to find out Haruaki-kun's preference."

"?"

By the time he tilted his head in puzzlement, Konoha had already jumped up before his eyes and returned to human form. Confronted with the vast view of bare skin, just as Haruaki reflexively tried to close his eyes, Konoha reached out with both hands to lift his face then—

"Mmmmphhh!?"

She kissed him on the lips.

It was quite unlike the kiss last time. A certain something slid into his mouth, stirring boldly, sucking with a slurping sound.

"Puha... Excellent—! My motivation is surging! Come, Harauki-kun!"

Konoha's body bounced up and turned back into the Japanese sword.

"Cow Tits! What are you doing!? T-Too shameless!"

"Konoha-kun! You're doing this kind of thing again! A-Absolutely ridiculous!"

"I don't hear anything at all!"

"D-Damn it...! Haruaki, I want motivation too! But it's way too shameless if I imitate her, so, uh, I'm doing this!"

"I-I want some too! Although it's absolutely ridiculous! But it can't be helped!"

Fear wrapped her arms around his back and hugged him tightly, pressing her silver-haired head against his chest. Kirika grabbed his arm and embraced it tightly in her bosom. Haruaki felt his arm sandwiched between two soft objects.

"Hey, you've totally lost me, now isn't the time for this kind of behavior, right!? Although I do agree that motivation is definitely needed!"

In this manner, noisily...

The four of them moved forward, in a style very much unique to them in this sense—

Simultaneously...

Fear was using the entire front half of her body to feel Haruaki's body warmth.

Through his warmth—She smothered what was within her.

The black mud pulsating in the depths? That did not disappear, it still existed.

After seeing the dead bodies Satsuko created, it become restless. After the «Wittelsbach Knights» appeared, it became restless. The more the battle situation intensified, the more it became restless. After Konoha acted unreasonably, it became restless.

In other words, a feeling of displeasure. A wish to cause mayhem.

However, apart from her own willpower right now, there were other things capable of suppressing that impulse.

Rubbing her forehead against his chest, she savored his smell.

This alone was not enough. She recalled the taste of his skin.

(...Mmm.)

She used his entire being to smother her impulse. Trying not to think. However, she still thought accidentally.

The squirming in the depths of her body. A shred of unease.

What was going to happen next? —Future options were definitely limited.

Hence, she could easily imagine them. Good futures, bad futures, the worst future.

She did not know which type of future among them would be chosen. Just as she did not know whom Haruaki wanted to be with the most between Konoha, Kirika and herself, she had no idea at all.

Even so, she still mustered her resolve.

The resolve to believe this to the very end: a wonderful future was what was going to arrive.

She inhaled forcefully again, allowing Haruaki to fill her interior.

Then as before, her unease was easily smothered.

Simple. Wonderful. At ease. Relief. Perhaps she had already gone through a makeover to become like this. To become an existence that was healthy in body and mind as long as she used Haruaki to fill up herself.

Okay, let's go. Everything was about to finish. A wonderful future was about to arrive.

Not like they could stay stuck together forever. The instant before the finish line was just ahead.

Seeing Kirika on the other side releasing Haruaki's arm with her face all red, she took this as the signal to slowly let go of Haruaki. His warmth, smell and texture departed.

Of course, she was definitely reluctant to part from these sensations, but conversely, she gained new pleasures. Because only during temporary separation could she ruminate and savor these experiences in her mind. She decided to immerse herself in them for now.

Ahhh, truly.

Just the thought of touching him again brought unbelievable joy to her heart.

She found this incredible and felt very happy at the same time.

The girls' warmth departed.

When Haruaki turned his attention back to reality, there were only two people before his eyes.

Sitting on the wheelchair, the Dominion Lord, and standing beside him, Dainsleif.

Dainsleif shook her head in disapproval.

"Impossible to comprehend. Like a parade of idiots, what are you people thinking?"

"A foolish question—Likewise, they do not comprehend our justice or our will. Simply a group of children... A group of children who jump up and down in rage after seeing their pile of sand in the park is about to be leveled."

"This place is not a pile of sand in a park. What you are trying to destroy is a place dear to us. That's why we must stop you."

Haruaki glared at the Dominion Lord and spoke. Sitting in his wheelchair and throne, he was gazing upon Haruaki with eyes marked with age.

Dainsleif rapidly and nimbly moved herself between the two of them.

"...Do you think you will succeed?"

"Hmph, you're the only ones left. I'd like to toss the question back at you: Do you think you can stop us?"

Hearing Fear's reply, Dainsleif answered with her shoulders shaking:

"So long as His Lordship and I remain, a minimum knightly order can be formed, a battlefield for a crusade to eliminate loathsome curses can be formed. Don't make me laugh."

She took a further step, stepping directly in front of the Dominion Lord.

"The only thing that saddens me is that I must request assistance from His Lordship himself."

"A foolish question. You are my sword. Now that the enemy is here, the sword must naturally be swung."

The Dominion Lord declared in a solemn voice:

"Hence—*permission granted to unsheath*, Dainsleif."

"Affirmative!"

Dainsleif answered sternly then raised her arm as though rebounding. The visor-like helmet made a clong sound and moved—Underneath, below the visor that had bounced up...

It was a pair of violet eyes shining like ominous gemstones.

In the next second, while the Dominion Lord extended his hand towards her from behind, her body jumped up.

Then by the time anyone noticed—

A sheathed broadsword was already held in the Dominion Lord's hand while he remained seated the whole time.

The base of the scabbard had a component shaped like a clasp. In material and structure, the clasp resembled Dainsleif's visor-like helmet very much. The clasp was already open, revealing a glimpse of the blade beneath which was unbelievably glowing with violet light. Using a Japanese sword as an analogy, this would be the state of *koiguchi*, loosening the sword slightly in its sheath for immediate use.

The Dominion Lord stroked the scabbard with his hand. Since the clasp was already open, all he needed to do was wait for the scabbard to slide off.

The red carpet underfoot received the scabbard's weight, producing a tiny thud—

Left in the Dominion Lord's hand was a sword flashing with ominous violet light, filled with murderous intent.

The shape itself was quite commonplace, a double-edged broadsword with thickness to its body. Attached to the blade's body was a thin steel plate with patterns engraved on it, thus increasing the blade's thickness. Subtly blinking as though breathing, the violet light completely enveloped the steel-colored body of the blade and the silver-white blade itself.

"That's... Dainsleif's original appearance—"

"Ha, don't overestimate them, Haruaki. Using a battery to glow might be a fun mechanism for little kids, but take a look, the sword's wielder is an old geezer. He intends to fight while sitting in his wheelchair."

Haruaki suddenly realized. Indeed, the Dominion Lord holding the sword was still seated in the wheelchair. «Dieu le veut»'s curse dictated death for the owner as soon as one stepped out of the territory under its rule. Because the town's "Dominionization" had not finished, the Dominion Lord was currently in a forced state of compromise, relying on another «Dieu le veut» spear, using that wheelchair as his temporary fiefdom—called the Mobile Territory, right?

In other words, until "Dominionization" finished...

The Dominion Lord could not walk from that wheelchair, Zilch Ground.

"Fighting on a wheelchair? Absolutely ridiculous. This can only work by staying impeccably on guard.. right?"

"A foolish opinion. You people have no idea about Dainsleif's curse."

Saying that, the Dominion Lord turned the sword's tip lightly towards them.

In a girl's voice, the sword explained her curse.

"My curse is... 'once drawn, a victim shall be killed.' Hence, I have been called a demonic sword."

"No need to sound so full of yourself. This type of curse is very common. I am a demon blade too."

Konoha remarked in disdain. However, Dainsleif's tone of voice did not change.

"Ignorant to a pitiful degree. As one would naturally expect from a lowly Wathe whose value is equivalent to dirt, but you fail to understand the meaning of the words 'shall be.' Once drawn, I shall move for the sake of killing, I shall exist for the sake of killing, the sword itself will be guided for the sake of killing. Putting it another way, once my sword is drawn, the result of 'killing someone' is already predetermined."

"Huh...?"

"The predetermined outcome, destiny and causality of 'a victim shall be killed' drives my sword forward—Its direction and the driving force behind the causal relationship is precisely the manifestation of my curse."

"—Foolish children will not understand, Dainsleif. Just let them witness with their own eyes: the ending reflected upon your blade, predetermined death that follows immediately, and the driving force of guaranteed death led by causality!"

"Yes, my lord!"

Instantly, the pair—

Together with the broadsword in his hand, the Dominion Lord sitting in his wheelchair rushed towards them.

With the speed of a bullet, with the momentum of a cannonball.

The wheelchair tilted, but probably secured by a belt or something, the Dominion Lord's body did not fall off. Together with the wheelchair's mass, he swung Dainsleif at high speed.

"Haruaki-kun!"

Konoha barely managed to block the attack, deflecting the sword. Against this massive impact as though blocking a giant rock, Haruaki felt his entire body's muscles screaming before it turned into an electrical current that rushed out of his left hand's amputation wound. He gritted his teeth to endure the pain.

The Dominion Lord's wheelchair slid backwards and landed, but immediately, the twisting wheels made a 180-degree turn. Clearly, the Dominion Lord was not operating it at all.

This time, the wheelchair did not advance in a straight line. Instead, tilting the wheels alternately, it approached with dance-like movements—Fear was the target.

"Fear!"

"Woah...!"

This was not something she could block barehanded. Probably not imitating Kokoro on purpose, but Fear instantly picked up a sword that had fallen by her feet, probably one of the knights' supplies, thus barely managing to block Dainsleif's attack. However, the Dominion Lord attacked relentlessly, chopping consecutively. Fear defended desperately—

"Chupacabra Bandage!"

Behind the Dominion Lord, Kirika extended the bandage in an attempt to strangle his neck or pull out the «Dieu le veut» spear embedded on the back of the wheelchair. However, the Dominion Lord stood the wheelchair up on one wheel and spun like a top, slicing through the bandage. Finally, Fear took this opportunity to distance herself.

"Tsk, I can't believe it... moves. So weird~"

"Dainsleif is the one pulling... Right!?"

"It appears that the speed and path can be controlled too. They mentioned a driving force of causality and guaranteed death, anyway, that means 'towards the enemy,' this kind of broad vector... Then making use of the vector, they created this method of fighting."

"I thought it was simply a charging thrust, but... Absolutely ridiculous. From the start, I should have calculated they would combine attacking motions with the wheelchair's mass and mobility. This might turn out to be even trickier than a normal battle."

"Indeed, we have never fought a wheelchair-bound opponent before, after all. But let us put this topic aside."

Konoha waved lightly. Haruaki guessed that she was probably looking at Fear's hand. Looking at the weapon she had picked up on the spot.

Still staring ahead, Fear pouted slightly and said:

"I don't want to hold it either, but there's no other way. Stop picking on me for such a simple weapon."

"Yeah, it's definitely challenging to handle a broadsword with bare hands... Konoha, it's fine, right?"

After Haruaki spoke on Fear's behalf, Konoha sighed several seconds later.

"Fine—with a weapon like that, even if an emergency came up, I could still destroy it instantly. I'll treat it as an extension of your arm. However, carelessness is forbidden. What I need to do still hasn't changed. Listen carefully, on the first symptoms of trouble, immediately—"

"I know I know... Anyway, forget about me for now and focus on them! Their movements definitely startled me but it's pretty much just fighting on a wheelchair as a substitute for legs, right? Nothing to be afraid of!"

Shifting the wheelchair as though drifting in motorsports, the Dominion Lord adjusted his position and held up Dainsleif again. With a calm gaze, he said:

"—Foolish concerns. Whenever someone says there is nothing to be afraid of, the speaker is already afraid."

"Shut up!"

The wheels screeched. Both sides clashed again.

Haruaki and Konoha desperately fought the Dominion Lord together. Dainsleif was a cursed sword and was moving according to her own will—Hence, the Sword-Kill Counter would not work. Even by using the powerful True-Kill Counter—

"Kuh...!"

"I am known as the legendary demonic sword! How could a mere demon blade from a remote island nation shatter me!?"

However, the opponent was a cursed broadsword with a long history. The two swords bounced off each other. Haruaki could feel they were evenly matched. It would be too naive to think the match could be concluded in a single strike.

Glowing faintly with violet light, the broadsword was swung with power, speed and spectacularly varying trajectories difficult to imagine coming from a man in a wheelchair. How could the elderly Dominion Lord's arm be so strong? His own swordsmanship was also astounding in skill. Difficult feints, combos, counters... He was not an opponent to be trifled with at all.

"Gwah... How can I... just keep defending... Take this!"

"Wait, Fear-san, you are too impetuous!"

But Konoha's warning came a step too late. Fighting like a caged beast, Fear lunged to attack using the sword she had picked up earlier, which ended up getting struck by the Dominion Lord's counter. The ordinary sword broke and flew away, leaving a scratch on Fear's cheek. Probably taking evasive action from more serious injuries, her petite body suddenly flew backwards and rolled on the ground. Then reaching around to search, she picked up a nearby sword.

"I'm not done yet...!"

She stood up and glared at the Dominion Lord. A fighting style relying on willpower and conviction instead of technique. Most likely displeased by this, the Dominion Lord scoffed from his wheelchair.

"—Foolish behavior. You are cursed. Do not fight as though you were a knight with a mission."

"Shut up, I... I have no choice!"

Tossing all concerns aside, Fear charged head on.

"...Mission? Of course I have one. I will defeat you in my rightful form! Then I'll return the town, the school and that home—back to normal! I absolutely won't give up!"

Haruaki could not watch quietly either and charged together, attacking with Konoha. Kirika also sent a flying bandage to cover them.

Silver hair fluttered by Haruaki's side.

To be honest, Fear's contribution to combat strength was negligible, but Haruaki was very grateful that she was willing to stay by his side and fight alongside them. He also felt saved.

However, even so—They still failed to harm the Dominion Lord and Dainsleif after all this time.

Although their fighting style was very eccentric at a glance, the pair's strength was like a straight fastball, relying on pure power with no gimmicks. Pure to the point of having no openings, there were no obvious weaknesses.

"H-Huff...!"

Haruaki's group kept consuming stamina. The fatigue accumulated from battling continually so far was weighing heavily on their backs. Even though Konoha was controlling his body, it did not prevent the physical body's base consumption. The shock from impacts felt concentrated on the end of his left hand, even giving him an illusion of the pain materializing into fingers. A matter-of-fact feeling there. A feeling impossible to forget. Forcing himself to forget was making him feel weary.

Hence—When he blocked Dainsleif's horizontal slash, swinging as though gliding through the air, Haruaki's knees suddenly lost strength and gave way.

"Haruaki-kun!"

Konoha had no choice but to endure the blow, absorbing the impact to jump to the side—or rather, allow Haruaki's body to be struck flying.

(Guh!)

As the view receded away rapidly, Haruaki saw the wheelchair's wheels turning from the recoil of Dainsleif's attack, then as though executing a spinning back kick, it knocked Kirika away in the opposite direction.

Haruaki gritted his teeth and waited for the next impact. Meanwhile, he could only pray for the girl who was left on the spot—

He prayed for the safety of the girl who was facing off against her actual parent.

(Fear...!)

Part 3

The screeching wheelchair landed after knocking Haruaki and the others away.

Fear faced off against the Dominion Lord head on, holding just a fragile and ordinary sword she had picked up.

Possibly to relieve boredom or to control the driving force, the Dominion Lord rotated his wrist, spinning Dainsleif in front of him as though performing a sword dance. Afterimages of violet light were left upon the viewer's retinas.

The Dominion Lord's expression remained constant throughout, completely emotionless, simply gazing at the justice he was meant to enforce. But at this moment, a slightly troubled expression seemed to surface in his eyes.

"I shall ask you... A continuation of the earlier conversation, although it is a foolish notion."

"What?"

Fear frowned but the Dominion Lord continued unfazed:

"Why must you fight in this manner? Like an orthodox knight who gets up relentlessly for the sake of the mission."

Similar words as before. Fear could only respond with the same remark, namely, "Shut up."

"You are cursed. This manner of fighting is contrary to what I expected. Even if Indulgence Disks have sealed away several mechanisms, there should be others remaining, right? How about «A Skewer Loved by Vlad Tepes»? «The Teeth» or the «Flower Sword Verazella»? Try conjuring them."

"Hmph, you want to see them?"

"A foolish question. Every mechanism stands as evidence of my sin, hence obliterating them would contribute to penance. This is my duty as your creator—Your father."

She felt her chest tighten. Just like when she was listening to him in the form of a box, this man's words were poisonous. She found it difficult to breathe, her heart was pounding, and she almost broke into tears.

But she did not want to admit defeat. Taking a deep breath, Fear said:

"To you... Am I just a collective of errors?"

"Indeed. As your creator, I can assert that your birth was an error. You were born in error, used in error, and most of all, shrouded in the error known as curses."

Without spending time to think, without spending time to agonize, the Dominion Lord answered immediately.

As though saying this could not be more obvious and logical. As though saying there was no other answer.

Fear was struck by an urge to laugh at his assertion, but while suppressing it, she said:

"Okay... Then I'll ask something a bit more specific. What you do think exists inside this body of mine that is such a great big error?"

Like issuing a challenge, she used that word on purpose.

Staring straight at him, she grinned and said:

"'Father,' tell me. What is inside me?"

"—A foolish question. There are thirty-two mechanisms of torture and execution along with loathsome curses."

"Nothing more?"

"Nothing more."

Still showing a poker face, the Dominion Lord answered in full seriousness.

Hence, Fear could no longer restrain herself and burst out laughing.

"Haha... Ahaha! You think you're so smart, right? What an idiot!"

"Insolent wretch! Are you insulting His Lordship!?"

The tip of Dainsleif's blade shook intensely, but did not charge at her. As though contemplating Fear's true intentions, the Dominion Lord stared intently at her. Since he did not understand, she would have to explain for him.

Fear placed her hand lightly against her chest.

Heart beat. Warmth. What lay inside.

"Inside me—Yes, for example... I know how to solve a Rubik's cube. Did you design that?"

The Dominion Lord frowned as though saying he did not comprehend what she was talking about. This also amused her.

"There's lots more. Such as feelings of liking rice crackers, feelings of liking furry animal, or content from the lessons in school that are stored in my mind. I've gained so much knowledge. I can also perform the dance I learned for the sports festival. Learning part-time jobs was also a piece of cake, like being a waitress or a salesperson. Also—oh right, knowing how to make chocolate. I can make very~ tasty chocolate, you know? Of course, including everyone in school, everyone in the shopping street, everyone in town..."

After pausing for a breath—

"Along with Haruaki... Haruaki and the others, my feelings of love for them all."

Feeling shy, she had to change her words at the last moment. However, she was telling the truth. These feelings really existed in her heart.

"Haha, so let me ask again. Did you design these feelings for me by using that prided mouth of yours?"

"Hmm..."

Once she articulated herself, she no longer felt afraid.

"—The matter-of-fact error, me, that you created in the beginning... has already been diluted by other things. Because I am shaped like a box, of course there will be many things stuffed inside, even to the point that the original contents no longer matter. Every space that used to remain empty all the time in the past has been filled up, even overflowing."

Beneath the palm she had pressed against her chest, she could feel those things that were breathing.

Those things that had been inserted bit by bit ever since she came here, less than a year ago.

Before she even noticed, these things had piled up in layers like flower petals.

Hence—Fear looked up.

She did not smile at her creator—Instead...

She stared straight at the Dominion Lord as though piercing him.

"Even if my birth is an error, the fact of my being here, coming here, and meeting everyone—all these things are absolutely not errors. This is the only point I can be certain of! You have no right to deny all this!"

Then she declared loudly to him.

The Dominion Lord shook his head lightly as though evading Fear's forcefulness. Reversing the direction of Dainsleif's rotation, he made a preparatory motion for a thrust.

"—Foolish thoughts!"

Empowered by the driving force formed from the intent to kill, the wheelchair rushed towards her with lightning speed.

A threat, but she was not afraid.

She had already realized that this man was nothing so extraordinary. Dominion Lord? A ruler like a king? An ancient alchemist? The enforcer of justice? These meanings were insignificant. To her, there was only one meaning.

Fear gripped her sword tightly. Entering a battle-ready stance, she yelled:

"Ha! Insisting your daughter is very foolish when you clearly didn't try to understand her—From my perspective, I think this kind of father is even more foolish!"

Part 4

The force of impact was substantial. Kirika did not think she could land safely.

Perhaps I might die again, hopefully I'll revive sooner—she thought, but the next sensation was not pain. Fabric and frame. She felt a melded mixture of softness and hardness envelop her body. A clatter of collapsing noises. Apparently knocked too far away, she had collided with one of the tents set up nearby. What unexpected fortune.

"Guh...!"

A sharp end of the broken frame stabbed into her arm, but it was already several times better than breaking her neck or cracking her skull open from smashing into the ground or a wall. She pulled the frame out and sat up while pushing the tent's remains to one side. Due to moving her body too quickly, she felt dizzy.

Merely knocked away by a wheelchair—She gnashed her teeth secretly. Her body's only advantage was immortality. She was useless once she died and would end up worrying others instead, which she did not want.

(Is there really nothing... that could give me more power? If there's a way to help them...)

Just at this moment...

Amidst the remains of the collapsed tent, her hand, which was on the ground to support her body, touched something.

Kirika involuntarily turned her head to look at the object—

Then she laughed "haha."

"Absolutely ridiculous... Because it's too trivial, they could not even be bothered to destroy it?"

After getting knocked away, Haruaki spun his body and entered a defensive posture, although it was Konoha controlling him to do that.

Even so, he still braced himself for an impact against the sports ground's hard surface. The instant he tensed his entire body—

However, what he felt was a body of flesh.

"Huh... That's odd? Kotetsu...?"

"..."

Kotetsu had spared his arms to catch him. More precisely, he was holding Haruaki in a bridal carry.

Naturally, Haruaki felt embarrassed and left Kotetsu's arms as though rolling away.

"Kotetsu? Thank you for saving me but how did you..."

"Because the number of armored knights decreased slightly. If it is just me, running over here should not be a problem..."

Haruaki glanced at the surroundings. Aiko's venom familiars, Sovereignty's doll, and the members of the Lab Chief's Nation including Un Izoey were still fighting.

However, he could definitely see several sets of silver armor fallen on the ground, no longer moving.

"Really? Then that'll really be a great help to us. We're actually about to run out of energy here, if you could join in—"

At this moment, Kotetsu directed an unfriendly gaze towards him, glaring at Haruaki as though he had something to say. But seconds later, he shifted his gaze away immediately.

"To be honest... Truth be told, I am also tired. I cannot attack in my usual condition."

"R-Really? Uh, then it can't be helped..."

"So... Hmm, umm, basically..."

At this moment, Konoha bounced up in Haruaki's hand.

"Ah, could it be... Kotetsu, would you like me to speak on your behalf?"

"N-No, Muramasa-sama! Ultimatel, this sort of thing... is only proper for me to suggest myself, so..."

What was he talking about? Haruaki tilted his head, then Kotetsu faced him again as though committing his resolve. Slightly pouting, he said:

"...This is just a temporary measure."

"?"

"I have yet to offer you my approval or my trust. Truth be told, you are truly incomprehensible and weak. Despite being weak, for some reason, you sometimes look very strong as well. Originally, I would never suffer such a fellow, but umm... Right! Because the magnanimous Muramasa-sama has taken the lead and done it, I am merely emulating her magnanimity, or perhaps one could call it learning, it would be nice to have a look at the world through the same kind of perspective... So!"

"Y-Yes?"

Kotetsu grabbed Haruaki's collar and brought his face up close in a very fierce manner.

Haruaki was thinking he was going to be killed—but in the next instant, Kotetsu went red in the face without warning and avoided eye contact.

"Just this once. Just this once... I permit you to make my body your plaything as you please."

"...!"

These profound words make Haruaki's heart skip a beat.

While the Wa Lolita outfit was silently fluttering to his feet—

Haruaki found his left hand holding a scabbard-less Japanese sword.

"K-Kotetsu...?"

"...Quit staring at me. You do have a thing for males after all? Ugh! Noo... Truth be told, I cannot believe you are using your fingers to play with that part immediately..."

"I-I'm holding you for the first time. At least let me confirm the grip's sensation!"

"Muu, somehow your comment sounds totally awful."

"Not at all!"

Haruaki was clearly just moving his fingers lightly to confirm the sensation of gripping the sword.

Although his left hand was missing fingers, the grip felt unexpectedly tight. Or perhaps Kotetsu himself was helping him out a bit.

"...Hmm, very well. But I still retain priority over Haruaki-kun's body, okay? Kotetsu."

"Certainly, I will provide support with the precondition of not obstructing you, Muramasa-sama."

Priority over his body sounded a bit weird but Haruaki decided not to dwell on the matter.

In any case, Kotetsu probably possessed a certain level of ability to assist the wielder's body. Combined with Konoha's power, Haruaki felt his body become much lighter. Naturally, this was his first time dual wielding Kotetsu and Konoha, but he felt that this should work.

"...Thank you, Kotetsu."

"Quit yammering. Shut up. All you need to do is move while holding me. This will be over immediately."

A gruff voice.

Haruaki smiled wryly and started walking back to the battlefield. Fear was currently facing off against the Dominion Lord.

He could hear—

Straightforward words, filled with her conviction.

(Fear...)

Get back there immediately. Fight alongside her. She is already fine.

Just as he took a step while thinking such thoughts, Konoha spoke.

For some reason, as though in resignation towards something, her words were mixed with a deep, deep sigh.

"...Oh~ Excuse me, Haruaki-kun, could we go somewhere first?"

Part 5

Returning as soon as one it had been dodged, attacking as soon as one thought it had been withdrawn, that was the kind of power driving the sword of Dainsleif. Despite attacking in straight lines, the trajectories were strange and complicated. Just as Fear desperately blocked an attack—

"...!"

She saw something behind the wheelchair, twisting in a serpentine manner to take on a scythe-like shape.

And there were two of them.

In the next instant—

"«Chupacabra Bandage»! And the... «Tragic Black River»—!"

Kirika suddenly rushed over, waving her arms as though dancing. The white bandage, which had been transferred to her left arm, and the black belt on her right arm—returned to its original location—formed two writhing spirals.

"Hmm!"

The Dominion Lord groaned and turned the wheelchair while swinging Dainsleif in a horizontal slash. However, the two monochrome strips, one black and one white, differed slightly in timing, extending independently like using both hands to attack consecutively, assaulting the Dominion Lord in wave after wave.

"Hah... Although I'm bringing this to a fight without practicing, I didn't expect it to work so well...!"

"Kirika!? That's...!"

Easier said than done. In fact, it probably required substantial willpower and concentration. Her forehead covered in sweat, Kirika said:

"I happened to find it in the adjacent tent. They probably thought they didn't need to go out of their way to destroy a mere belt... Or they simply forgot. Anyway, this is mine. Although I took it back without asking, they're not going to object!"



"All you did was retrieving an insignificant and frail Wathe! Don't get too full of yourself!"

Yelling, Dainsleif used her own blade to slice through «Chupacabra Bandage» and the «Tragic Black River». Then the wheelchair slid between the two of them to close in on Kirika. Long before Fear gripped her sword, someone had already squeezed his way in front of her.

Obviously, it was Haruaki.

For some reason—He was holding a Japanese sword in each hand. In his right was an elegant Japanese sword in its black scabbard. In his left was an unbridled and unsheathed Japanese sword.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhh!"

After blocking Dainsleif, Haruaki instantly counterattacked with speed and power, a consecutive offense that made use of complementary advantages. Fear originally thought Haruaki's left hand which she had maimed would have trouble holding a sword, but Kotetsu looked even heavier than Konoha and through judicious use of both sides' weights according to the principle of leverage, thereby compensating for grip strength while generating destructive power.

After clashing evenly with the Dominion Lord for several rounds, Haruaki jumped away greatly as though saying "enough."

"Huff... Huff..."

"Compared to Nirushaaki-sama, you are too lacking in stamina. I am very dissatisfied."

"...That's only to be expected, right? Don't compare me with that kind of natural-born battle maniac."

"Kotetsu, you may exert more force on the left arm without any concerns. Although not to the point of tearing muscles apart, so long as muscle ache is the only aftereffect, Haruaki-kun will just have to endure it."

"Yes, understood."

"Uwoah~ What a spartan approach..."

Haruaki sighed and slumped his shoulders. Then as though lifting his spirits, he grinned and looked at Fear over his shoulder.

"It's not all over yet. You want to punish that idiot father, right? Let us help."

"Yeah, count me in as well. I suppose he's one of those monster parents who've become fashionable lately. Although it's absolutely ridiculous, he won't understand unless we resort to force."

Kirika also chimed in. Had they all heard what she said to the Dominion Lord just now? Fear felt a little embarrassed—But immediately, she thought candidly to herself: "Fine, whatever."

She felt her courage multiply just from the fact that she was facing the same direction as Haruaki and the others. She glared at the Dominion Lord.

"Foolish behavior... Just as Dainsleif stated, the mere increase of one or two insignificant Wathes will not turn the tide."

"Really? How will we know without trying...? If anything, I believe the gap in combat strength has definitely shrunk."

"Even this statement is also—a foolish answer."

The Dominion Lord suddenly extended a wrinkled finger, pointing at—

The spear standing upright next to the throne area.

Fear shuddered and swiftly turned her head to confirm the large clock installed on the side of the school building. Time. The current time—

"...!"

Their time limit of 2pm had already passed.

As though saying there had been enough stoppage time, the clock's minute hand kept advancing.

Then when Fear held her breath and looked back at the Dominion Lord's direction—

He had his hands on the wheelchair's armrests.

Slowly—

Walking down from the wheelchair, he stepped onto the sports ground and stood up straight.

Dying as soon as one exited the territory under their rule—Governed by this curse, for him to accomplish such an act meant that—

"'Dominionization' is complete."

The Dominion Lord glanced at the spear tip's progress—it was entirely buried in the ground now—and exhaled.

Then quietly, he spoke simply to inform them of the truth.

"This land where I stand is already the Second Knights Dominion."

Fear and company were staring at the spear in shock.

"No... way...!"

"We failed to make it in time...!?"

A hair-raising, icy cold and dark feeling shrouded their backs. Try as they did to push it away, it hassled them relentlessly, refusing to let go, whispering softly in their ears to face reality.

The time had passed.

The spear tip had entered the ground completely.

The Dominion Lord who would die as soon as he left his territory was currently standing away from his wheelchair.

The meaning represented by all this.

Really? They did not make it in time? For the sake of eliminating them, the Knights Dominion was already able to bring out 100% of their power; that home's meaning was already lost; the place they belonged to had already vanished?

No way, no way, impossible.

It felt very unreal. Consciousnesses grew hazy as though paralyzed. Senses used to detect the surrounding situation were plunged into turmoil.

Among all this, they even noticed something else.

The Dominion Lord was standing. His facial features. Cheeks. Back of his hands. His wrinkles seemed to be decreasing—

Possibly a psychological effect? He looked like he was getting younger.

Konoha said as though groaning:

"Your face...! How could this kind of thing be possible...!?"

"A foolish question. Zilch Ground is simply the minimum soil to provide me with mobility, but the Second Knights Dominion is a territory far more vast and even more official than Zilch Ground. A feudal lord standing on an official fiefdom deserves to be granted commensurate and proper dignity. My semblance earlier was only temporary. This is truly my usual appearance as the Dominion Lord."

To confirm Dainsleif's weight, the Dominion Lord swung her with his hand which had decreased in the number of wrinkles. Not rejuvenated to the extent that

one could call him a young man, he was still an elderly man. However, he did not give off any vibes that ought to belong to an elderly man who had just gotten off his wheelchair, simply exuding a mind-boggling air of strength, resembling an ancient tree that still stood young and flourishing.

Strong, robust, vigorous. Rather than quantity in muscle, these adjectives adorned his body through exuded vibes difficult to articulate. He looked downwards at the Dainsleif he was swinging.

"My first knight, there is no need to hold back any further. Remove even more of the scabbard."

"But what of your body?"

"A foolish question. Given this current body, there is no cause for concern."

"Affirmative."

The Dominion Lord swept his hand across the violet-glowing body of the broadsword's blade. In the next second, the thin steel plate with the patterned surface fell off from the blade's body. No, it was no ordinary plate anymore. Fallen by the Dominion Lord's feet was a slender piece of steel. It felt understandable. The Dominion Lord was correct, this was the Dainsleif broadsword's final scabbard. Something serving as a stone weight, serving as shackles.

Remaining after the scabbard's removal was the elegant appearance of Dainsleif, thinner in thickness than before.

An outline of orthodox and intimidating straight lines, a bare blade clouded by nothing. Enveloped in a faint violet glow, it even looked mysterious and fantastical. One could feel that it had shed all redundant and forced additions to reach perfect balance. This appearance convinced any viewer that this was truly her original and rightful form.

The Dominion Lord looked down slightly towards the sword in his hand and said:

"The demonic sword of mythical times did not unleash its full power on every occasion... Sometimes, it was beyond the ability of the wielder's body to withstand, sometimes it was mired in the inability to react and adapt on the spot. Hence, I crafted this set of shackles to install on her."

"Hmph. Truth be told, I hope you are not bluffing. There was once a man named Sasaki Kojirou who tossed his scabbard away with gusto, but ended in defeat."

The Dominion Lord remained expressionless after Kotetsu's remark but his voice answered in a tone of exasperation:

"Under the incomplete power of Zilch Ground, my elderly body is a poor match for Dainsleif's nature. However, things are different now—"

The Dominion Lord had been moving the sword tip slowly so far, but just as his motion suddenly seemed to stop—

His body had already appeared behind Haruaki.

"...Guuuuuh!?"

Haruaki groaned. It was incomprehensible for a moment. What happened?

The Dominion Lord's appearance and condition was so different from before, he was like a different person. The two Japanese swords crossed before Haruaki's eyes. Haruaki stumbled and fell, sitting on the ground. A bloody scratch appeared on his cheek—With that, he finally understood. It was a charging thrust. As earlier, the Dominion Lord had charged Haruaki with his entire body to execute a slash, propelled by Dainsleif's driving force of guaranteed death—thus achieving supernatural speed. Kotetsu and Konoha had blocked instantly, but not completely. Thus, Haruaki was cut lightly on the cheek.

Just the cheek. Had there been any minor deviation, a difference of a few centimeters, a change in the sword's positioning—

Haruaki shuddered, involuntarily bringing his hand against his chest.

It's okay. It's—

Haruaki got up frantically while muttering in disbelief:

"W-What's going on? That was way too fast just now...!"

"Ha, that terrified face of yours was like a caged pig's, an excellent match for one who lives in cohabitation with filthy Wathes. Did you think those slow movements were the extent of my curse as a demonic sword? What the curse of guaranteed death represents—Savor it with your own body!"

While Dainsleif was yelling, the Dominion Lord kicked the ground and jumped. The bare blade approached as though gliding through the air, fast as an arrow, like a bullet.

This time, their target was—This side!

"Nu... Gwoh!"

"Fear!"

A strange snapping sound. The instantly raised sword broke and flew up. At the same time, she was confronted with pressure and impact that felt like a car collision, sending her flying helplessly then roll on the ground. Or maybe she had jumped subconsciously. No idea. Striking the sports ground, her body creaked but at least she had avoided a critical injury. She forced herself to stand up, but just at that moment, the Dominion Lord immediately turned around after knocking Fear away and charged in the opposite direction. Probably having anticipated herself to be the next target, Kirika rapidly reacted and jumped to the side, but—

"Gah... Damn it, absolutely ridiculous...!"

"Kirika, are you okay!?"

"Just a scratch on my arm. It'll be okay soon!"

Judging from the amount of Kirika's bleeding, Fear did not believe that it was just a scratch on the arm. Her arm dangled limply while she forcibly stood up. Despite

anticipating the attack and dodging at what she believed was perfect timing, she had failed to evade completely—This meant that the opponent's speed was beyond expectation.

Fear felt her heart rate rise. Her body kept shaking. The aching all over her body was such a nuisance.

Truly, the combination of Dainsleif's unshackled speed with the Dominion Lord's fully unleashed strength under «Dieu le veut»'s blessing was overwhelmingly powerful. Fear could not help but admit that.

"Don't clump up together, everyone! Spread out a bit!"

Haruaki was out of breath, but he still readied the Japanese swords in a stance.

The demonic sword flew again like a cannonball. Instead of blocking for now, Haruaki chose to evade—but failed to dodge completely. The result was Konoha and Kotetsu crossing blades with that demonic sword again, deflecting its trajectory with much difficulty. Haruaki frowned, was it because his shoulder was about to dislocate? Or his left hand was in pain? Or maybe both. Just as she tracked the Dominion Lord's whereabouts with her gaze, Fear rolled while sprawled on the ground. The blade swept past, over her head. She could feel several strands of silver hair fluttering into the air, sliced into many pieces.

(Damn... it...!)

They were struggling to resist in a one-sided fight. They were being toyed with in storm-like brutality.

The charging slashes were faster than the naked eye could see clearly. However, the opponent's high speed did not translate to agility. In the moment of contact, it was possible to feel the broadsword's sense of weight. Speed was being enlisted to convert into destructive power.

It was like having murderous trains rushing at you from all directions endlessly.

Although they endured desperately, it was impossible to stay uninjured. Whether Fear, Haruaki or Konoha, the wounds on their bodies were increasing bit by bit. Their bodies were also slowly starting to have trouble keeping up with their thoughts and intents. Even if Fear wanted to counterattack, she had no weapon and did not even have the time to search for a sword that had fallen on the ground. There was a feeling of darkness before her eyes.

Was there no solution? No countermeasures... at all?

This darkness and anxiety was probably occupying Haruaki's heart as well. He looked at the Japanese sword in his right hand and asked:

"Konoha...! Can you find an opening?"

"The speed is admittedly astounding... But their movements are constrained in straight lines like a pinball the whole time. As long as the attacks are seen clearly, it might be possible to counterattack..."

That made sense, she was right. So far, the Dominion Lord had simply charged like a train and backed away repeatedly. Even while wielding supernatural speed and power, he could still be taken down as long as they were able to see through his movements.

Having decided their temporary direction, they looked at the Dominion Lord again. At this moment, he happened to have stopped his incessant charging. Standing in front of them, he was twirling Dainsleif's blade tip just as he had done while seated on the wheelchair earlier. Was he using that motion to control the vector of charging?

The Dominion Lord glanced at the broadsword in his hand and said:

"Dainsleif—You are rushing into things too impetuously. Are you unable to exert restraint, having lacked activity for so long?"

"Yes! My utmost apologies for my poor patience."

"The simplicity of jousting has its merits, but only charging straight like this would be foolish behavior. Concentrate, refine and control the power of causality from the curse of guaranteed death—With that, your sword will be able to continue seeking causality like a knight's consecutive strikes without traveling through unnecessary distance. Can you accomplish this?"

"...If you would permit me a little time to calm down."

"Permission granted."

The Dominion Lord stared intently in Fear's direction and continued to brandish the sword's tip.

Kirika healed the new wounds all over her body while murmuring in puzzlement:

"What are they talking about? Why aren't they attacking...?"

In a hoarse voice evocative of a twitching smile, Konoha answered:

"From what I can see, they will immediately render our new strategy moot. Judging from the contents of their conversation, as long as they take a break to focus their concentration, it would be possible to perform movements different from the charging so far."

"...Putting aside whether that is actually possible, but supposing that sort of speed could be used to attack fiercely like using a normal sword, then it would be a bit..."

Kotetsu stopped mid-sentence. Most likely, his pride did not permit him to say more. It did not permit him to say anything that could be construed as doom and gloom.

At this moment, the panting Haruaki glared at the Dominion Lord and said:

"...But even if that's the case, we can't run away, right? We're almost completely exhausted, so let's use this time to recover our energy a bit. Regardless whether

the enemy's movements will change, I think it'll be easier than doing it right now—"

"Oh? Can you lot really afford to be so laid back?"

Dainsleif's voice carried obvious mockery. Konoha shook.

"What do... you mean?"

"As expected of wretched Wathes that only know curses, too foolish. To think you have forgotten—You failed to make it in time, didn't you?"

"What...?"

"'Dominionization' is already complete. As king, my master is the first to receive its blessings. Naturally, the rest of them are next. Those who have lost consciousness are no exception... Of course, the dead are a separate matter."

Presumably as a sign of confidence, Dainsleif continued to speak fluently:

"Right now, the spear is slowly giving everyone the blessing of righteousness, turning knights into perfect knights. And perfect knights do not lie sprawled on the ground in unseemliness, because this power will make them stand up again. How much time do you reckon is required for the transmission of power to complete, for all of the unconscious knights to wake up?"

"!"

What she meant was: The many knights, the many dozens of knights, whom they had spent so much effort to defeat, were going to wake up? They were going to attack with hatred, resentment and righteousness once again?

Fear swiftly looked behind her to the people who were holding back the «Wittelsbach Knights». Several sets of armor were collapsed on the ground but unbelievably, even the fallen armor seemed to be shaking slightly as though preparing to stand up and attack again.

Fear's back ran cold. Dark mist surged from the depths of her mind.

Even after telling herself not to think, she still could not help but think.

The Dominion Lord with Dainsleif, having obtained abnormal speed and power. High-speed charging attacks like cannonballs. Then there was the possibility of the two of them using that kind of speed to engage in normal swordfighting. Under such conditions, would they be able to resist? No idea. No idea.

They still did not know if they would be able to defeat the Dominion Lord and Dainsleif, who stood as an overwhelming threat—

And now, added to that...

The threats left behind them were going to reawaken? By this juncture, the knights' strength would be completely reset? No, if the enemy's combat potential, which they had spent so much effort to reduce, were to return at greater strength, then, in that case, no matter how much of a struggle they put up—

"Not yet!"

Haruaki yelled. The firmness in his tone of voice startled Fear, blowing away the dark mist in the depths of her mind.

"It's not over yet. Before other knights make their way here, before the situation changes, we will end things *now*! That's our only option!"

"Although we still need to recover a certain level of energy, the next strike... will probably be the last chance..."

"Truth be told, this is a last stand."

"Hmm... We must do it. It's absolutely ridiculous coming from me, but even if this life had to be put on the line...!"

Well said—Fear encouraged herself again. We must do it. Now was too soon to think it was over. Too soon to despair. Since they had things to do, since there was a possibility, they must take action—

However, would it work? Were they really able to defeat—

The Dominion Lord who had obtained the full blessings of "Dominionization" first as king? And also the ancient demonic sword Dainsleif, cursed with the causality of death?

After defeating them, were they able to destroy the «Dieu le veut» spear behind those two...?

"Konoha, can you do it?"

"Hooh... I don't think there is a choice."

At this moment, Haruaki waved to Fear. Warily keeping tabs on the Dominion Lord's movements, she approached Haruaki.

Clamping Konoha under one arm first, Haruaki used his free hand to search his pockets—then tossed something familiar to Fear, something that even felt nostalgic. Two of them to boot.

Two Rubik's cubes.

"Ah..."

"I took these from Konoha's removed clothing just now."

Staring motionlessly at the Rubik's cubes in her hands, Fear only managed to say:

"Cow Tits, is this... okay...?"

"Of course it is not okay. But it cannot be helped."

Konoha answered gruffly with displeasure. However, Haruaki's shoulders shook lightly as he said:

"Haha, Konoha, you didn't even complete your sentence... Fear, what she means by cannot be helped isn't referring to having you do this in order to defeat that guy. Instead, it's because she heard what you said earlier to the Dominion Lord."

The Japanese shook as though protesting "Hey, Haruaki-kun!", followed by a sigh.

"...Since you said that you are filled with many things, show me. With that, if only for this one instant—That was simply my conclusion. In other words, I was only preparing myself."

If only for this one instant, you should be fine. You won't go berserk, right?

Then taking a gamble, she prepared herself.

That was what she meant, right?

A certain emotion surged in Fear's heart. After she clutched the Rubik's cubes tightly, the Japanese sword in Haruaki's right hand shook then spoke in a cheerful manner as though suddenly remembering something:

"Yes, basically that, like a certain occasion. Even if you go berserk, I will simply destroy you while humming a tune, so there's no need for you to think too much."

Konoha was clearly speaking in a joking tone.

Probably knowing it was just a joke, Haruaki simply shrugged.

Then, Fear also committed her resolve.

Holding a Rubik's cube in each hand, she confirmed their hardness while saying:

"..It feels like now is the only chance, so let me tell you guys something. Dainsleif here in front of us has the final Indulgence Disk. By putting in that last disk, I will 100% never go berserk again, to become a harmless being. Definitely... Without a doubt."

"What!? Fear, are you serious!?"

"Yes, I am. Yamimagari Pakuaki told me."

Kirika reflexively frowned but Fear smiled and said:

"I don't think he's lying. If he tricked me, the one who knows far more about me than anyone else will have voiced a correction."

She turned her head to look. The Dominion Lord raised an eyebrow.

"—Foolish question. Indeed, that would be the result. However—"

Currently, she did not need to hear the rest, so she interrupted him.

"Yeah, as for what I actually wanna say... This will probably be my final act of torture, the last act of violence. So, I want to explain the meaning of this first."

"Meaning...?"

"Although it doesn't change anything by this point even if it's revealed, I don't to... hide things from you guys. This is about what kind of thing exactly I am."

Haruaki tilted his head, grinning in a slightly forced manner.

"Really, by this point. Although I can't say lightly that I knew a long time ago... As to what kind of thing you are, I already knew from the beginning, so—"

"There are things you don't know, which I wanna tell you."

Haruaki shut his mouth.

Then Fear thought back to yesterday when she had turned into a box to close off her mind.

Inside her room, back when she was conversing with Pakuaki over the communications device—

Do you still remember what happened at the cultural festival?

That's right, while you were operating your mechanisms, I recorded it for observations. This video is definitely very useful. We watched it repeatedly after the fact to analyze, investigate, and run calculations.

Even to the point of creating imitations.

However, we encountered a bottleneck at this step. On further thought, it was only natural.

Hey, don't you find it strange? Don't you think this is an unknown?

A steel box that can transform into thirty-two different mechanisms, can something like that really exist? No no no, aren't you actually existing right here? Not a philosophical question of this sort, but something more practical&mdahsh;Purely from the perspective of science and physics.

In terms of volume, mass, robustness, structure, mechanisms.

A transformable mechanism of that sort shouldn't be able to operate.

Physically impossible. A structure like yours breaks the laws of physics.

You're probably making a face right now that's saying "what's the point of telling me this?" Yes, I understand how you feel. After all, you were created in the real world. You never noticed the whole time because the most fundamental unknown inside your body is located at the very heart and root. Just like humans don't notice their hearts beating.

So, let's return to the subject of Indulgence Disks. An individual disk is able to prevent you from using one mechanism while applying a "curse weakening" effect on the remaining mechanisms.

Why would something that restrict your mechanisms have this power to weaken curses?

You guys might not have considered this at all, so let me give you a hint. Once you come up with this answer, you'll be able to explain what I just brought up, the issue of your mechanisms whose operation is physically impossible.

Namely—

Fear slowly breathed in.

She turned her awareness to the Rubik's cubes in her hands.

She imagined the last of her simulated forms that remained. The shape of something like her.

"Mechanism No.19 gouging type, spiral form: «Human-Perforator»—"

Indeed. Thinking back, she should have known a long time ago, right? How did this body of hers work? What was the power driving her, this mechanical box?

Putting aside for now the many different things that filled "her current self."

She did not deny what the Dominion Lord said, that she was an existence of error from the very start.

Because she could not deny it.

Hence, she could only accept and admit it.

There was neither terror nor anger in her heart, nor cowardice, nor unease.

Only a bit of sadness.

That was all.

She took another breath. This was the last delay.

Clutching tightly as though praying—

The cube she had found in cupboard, which Haruaki had given to her.

And the cube from her very first underclassman.

Then Fear said those words.

She said the words that represented her as an object, words which she had never paid attention to before—

"—Curse Calling."

Something appeared in her left and right hands respectively, then she felt their weight.

The sensation of two drills.

After gazing upon them as though they were her own children, Fear turned her head lightly to look at Haruaki and the others.

With a sad smile, she said:

"I... Before getting cursed, I was already machinery that operated by using the power of curses."

Part 6

"This body, this block of steel that is me, was originally something forged by melting down cursed tools. Cursed swords, cursed shields, cursed hammers... In other words, that *cursed steel* was my raw material. The power from curses compensated for the paradoxes in the mechanism that is me. Otherwise, operation would be impossible with normal steel."

The Dominion Lord did not refute her. Of course.

She was forced to realize and recall things about herself. The process of her birth. What she said could not possibly be mistaken.

"...Before that castle lord used me as a tool of torture and execution, to be cursed by the negative thoughts of the victims—I, my body, was already cursed. Cursed at birth, hence—"

She wanted to ask: very disgusting, right?

She wanted to ask: your entire body is creeped out, right?

She wanted to ask: I'm even more cursed than cursed, right?

But—

"What? It's just something so trivial."

Haruaki remarked, stroking his chest as though greatly relieved.

Then with his usual smile, he looked at her.

As though saying that her confession was nothing to be concerned about at all.

As though saying it would be very stupid to be hung up over something like this.

In an upbeat tone of voice, he asked her:

"So, is that all?"

"...That's all."

Relaxing the corners of her eyes, smiling as though to oppose him, Fear shed a tear at the same time.

Not only because Haruaki's response made her very happy—

But also because Haruaki had not discovered the true meaning behind her confession, which was a relief.

Part 7

Well then—with a drill in each hand, Fear faced off squarely against the Dominion Lord.

Haruaki also confirmed Konoha and Kotetsu's weight in his hands. The process of Fear's birth definitely surprised him, but he still felt: so what? Even if Fear was steeped in error in the moment of her birth, an insane creation of a mad alchemist, the current Fear should not be despised.

Allowing the ribbon-like weapons on her left and right arms to wriggle like living creatures, Kirika asked:

"Any plan?"

"I don't think there is time to devise a complex plan now. Neither is there time for putting one into motion. Our only choice is to simply rush forward."

Konoha's reply caused Fear to toss her silver hair.

"Hoho, Cow Tits, looks like we're finally on the same page. I agree too. Since there's no time, we'll have to decide the battle in one strike—A one-hit kill. You guys have to find a way to give me the chance to land one attack. Then I'll handle the rest."

Fear's suggestion did not offer anything concrete. The Japanese sword rose up as though inspecting the expression on her face.

Then she sighed.

"I am not responsible if this fails."

"Leave it to me."

Fear grinned and replied. Thus, their preparations were complete.

However, the same went for their opponents too.

Waving the tip of his sword, the Dominion Lord changed his rhythm slightly.

"Foolish behavior—This is my last offer of mercy. My objective is already complete. Putting the loathsome Wathes aside, you humans might be able to preserve your lives if you choose to flee."

"Ha... You want us to survive alone after running away, and feel grateful to you as well? No thank you!"

"What a choice that feels absolutely ridiculous from the bottom of my heart!"

"Haruaki and Kirika both rushed at the Dominion Lord.

Holding Dainsleif, the Dominion Lord approached in high speed to engage them in battle. Filled murderous intent, the broadsword led his elderly body and legs to advance. In extraordinary speed.

Unlike before, the broadsword stopped in front of them.

"Your deaths are now even more certain! Prepare to accept causality!"

Dainsleif's voice. Then maintaining the distance he had closed in, the Dominion Lord swung the broadsword.

No longer a simple charging attack as before, the Dominion Lord's body remained on the spot while the violet-glowing broadsword accelerated unnaturally, as though thrusters had been added behind the sword.

"Woah!?"

Just as they had said, Dainsleif was starting to control that death-directed driving force with greater precision. Haruaki panicked for an instant but did not forget what he had to do.

(I must make them... stop...!)

Instead of dodging, he chose to meet the attack head on. Entrusting his body to the two cursed swords, Konoha and Kotetsu, he desperately blocked Dainsleif whose speed was so fast that it seemed like it would slice space open. It did not end with one strike. There was a second, a third, more than he could count.

Coming at him like an explosion, the broadsword attacked him endlessly. Haruaki gave up understanding a long time ago how his and the opponent's bodies were moving.

"K-Konoha...!"

"Gahhhhhhhh—This speed and power, it's almost like that time...! Kotetsu! Spin at maximum speed! We won't last if keep considering consequences!"

"Yes!"

At that moment.

Hearing Konoha, Haruaki suddenly recalled what things were like back when they were facing off against Hinai Elsie, a former member of the Family, who was using «Clockwork Life», a cursed pocket watch capable of compressing the owner's time. Nicknamed as the "Strongest" and "Four Minutes," that was what she used when going all-out. The movements and power demonstrated by the Dominion Lord and Dainsleif currently felt comparable to Elsie's level—

In other words, a single mistake would mean instant death.

Just as what he had felt from Hinai Elsie, this was overwhelming brutality to an absurd degree.

But conversely, this also meant that they already had similar experience, which was why they were instantly able to deploy the only countermeasures. Konoha was right, they must ignore consequences and pull out all the stops. They must do that, even if it would only last a few seconds. Because the alternative was losing their lives in the next second.

Propelled by a curse, the broadsword's mass jumped and flew unhindered, showing unparalleled destructive power. Barely managing to deflect the attacks, Haruaki's arms felt numb. Konoha and Kotetsu groaned in pain. The shock of impacts also attacked the wounds all over his body, not just the left hand. The surging sense of nausea, was it the result of injury or lack of oxygen?

"«Black River»...!"

Trying to turn the tide in the deteriorating situation, Kirika circled to the side and prepared to extend the weapon on her right arm. But most likely predicting this, Dainsleif's propulsion changed direction all at once. Without a running start or any preparatory motion, the Dominion Lord's body instantly reached top speed like a bouncing pinball, approaching Kirika head on. Even though Dainsleif had switched to executing consecutive slashes, it did not mean she could not move around by charging as before.

"Crap...!"

Entering the vortex formed by «Chupacabra Bandage» and the «Tragic Black River», the Dominion Lord approached Kirika while swinging Dainsleif. The Dominion Lord narrowed his eyes at the bondage suit visible from the gaps in Kirika's clothing, tattered from the battles so far.

"«Gimestorante's Love»—Letting it go would also be foolish! A Wathe that should not exist in this world!"

Dainsleif's massive blade chopped at Kirika from above. Haruaki's back froze. Of course, the Dominion Lord knew about the bondage suit, hence his attack—compared to attack Kirika's body, his aim was more about destroying «Gimestorante's Love». Crap!

"...!"

But just in that instant, Kirika's face suddenly changed dramatically—with miraculous timing, she lost balance and fell on the ground. Did her legs stumble from fatigue or did something trip her? Haruaki could not be sure but it still stood as a fortunate accident. After Kirika fell, Dainsleif simply swept past her hair. Just as the Dominion Lord was musing "hmm"—

"Konoha! Kotetsu!"

"Yes, we are on it!"

"Do not order me so casually!"

To prevent the Dominion Lord from following up on his attack, Harauki charged at top speed. While using his entire body to sense Konoha and Kotetsu's intent, he added his own strength without opposing them, pouring in his full might to swing the Japanese swords. Without extra thinking, he simply attacked randomly with all his strength.

"Guh, ohhhhhhh!"

"—Foolish behavior!"

Seizing an opening when Haruaki was catching his breath, the Dominion Lord swung his sword faster than the naked eye could discern. Konoha and Kotetsu formed a crossed in the nick of time, sliding before Haruaki's chest to block the attack. Otherwise, he might have been chopped cleanly into top and bottom halves. However, the slicing attack's power was not deflected entirely, causing Haruaki to fly away backwards. Without any mental energy to get into defensive posture, he simply fell on the ground and rolled.

Tasting dirt from sports ground on his lips, Haruaki looked up to see Kirika sprawled on the ground similarly. «Chupacabra Bandage» and the «Tragic Black River» were extended, entangling the Dominion Lord's left and right feet respectively. While Haruaki was attacking with Konoha and Kotetsu, she had cautiously extended them. The haphazard attack earlier was not a waste.

"Fear!"

"Fear-kun!"

Perhaps for only an instant, the Dominion Lord's movements were definitely halted. Only now.

Holding a «Human-Perforator» in each hand, Fear sprinted and jumped up high.

Looking up at her, the Dominion Lord and Dainsleif prepared to attack in return.

"Don't waste your energy. I am a sword while you are just a meaningless tool of torture! On completely different levels, do you think that my sword can be shattered by that thing of yours!?"

"Indeed, your purpose is not being a weapon. Know yourself properly, my sinful daughter. You cannot accomplish anything except torture and execute humans!"

Without evading, Fear confronted their gaze and words head on.

"That's why! I want to change, and I've tried hard to change the whole time!"

Then—

The drills Fear was holding in her hands began to make noises. Click-clack, they began to transform.

Indeed—Haruaki watched the scene with tremendous pride swelling within him.

Fear still had infinite potential.

The potential for infinite change, held equally by every person.

She believed in this fact. He also believed in this fact.

Hence, nothing was impossible.

Anything was possible.

Even creating a brand-new self—

Fear brought her hands together in midair. Naturally, the two «Human-Perforators», transforming gradually partially as though they were disintegrating, were brought together as well. As though they were complementary to each other, one drill melded inside the twisted form of the other drill, with one drill filling up the expanded portion of the merge, one blade connected together with the other blade where spaces had appeared—

The two drills were forcibly merged in union to form one gigantic drill.

That was hers—

The manifestation of the wish of "wanting to change."

The evidence of the fact of "being able to change."

"...Foolish behavior, foolish behavior! How could that be possible...!?"

"If it's me! Then it's possible!"

Of course it's possible—Haruaki agreed in his heart.

Because Fear possessed the resilience to endure this change. Because she had been nurturing it the whole time.

He knew long ago. How could he possibly not know?

As a box, she was already filled with the necessary parts. Just as she had said herself—

Hence, all requirements were met. Nothing was impossible. Everything was already connected.

The strength Fear had obtained in this town had filled the spaces, serving as lubricant, turning into glue for making connections.

Then born from this was—

A gigantic and even more gigantic, unique, unfinished and undeveloped...

But stronger than anything else, more dazzling and striking than anything else...

Honest and straightforward at all times, as though capable of piercing all substances—A drill.

"This isn't a tool of torture! Nor a tool of execution! Nor a weapon! This is the current me right here! Using this me—I'll crush you, Dainsleif!"

Spinning the blade of this super gigantic drill, Fear descended upon the Dominion Lord.

Swinging Dainsleif, the Dominion Lord engaged the drill.

Then—

The demonic sword's curse of "*once drawn, a victim shall be killed.*"

To the bitter end, it came true correctly and lamentably.

An acute noise stood as evidence that Fear's enormous drill had shattered Dainsleif's blade from the middle.

Spinning in the air, the tip of her broken blade fell from the action of gravity.

Deeply, it pierced the Dominion Lord's chest.

Epilogue

Part 1

Haruaki could not help but think to himself, this atmosphere really felt like the aftermath of a festival. That being said, it would also be a bit too disrespectful.

"Pay attention, everyone~ Hurry and clean up, clean up. If you don't divide up the work, the cleaning up won't finish~"

This carefree voice was also part of the reason. Pakuaki was currently issuing orders to his subordinates from the Lab Chief's Nation. His attitude was so upbeat that it felt like he would be blowing "poot-poot-poot" nonstop if he had one of those whistles for issuing commands. Dressed in lab coats, the researchers were mainly using a special tool resembling a rope or a ribbon to tie up the knights collapsed all over the place. Although "Dominionization" had activated at one

point, Haruaki's group had apparently made it in time to cancel it before the spear took effect to wake up the unconscious knights. In light of the Dominion Lord receiving the blessing effect perfectly as the owner, the timing was definitely a close shave. They had made it in time quite miraculously.

The massively built researcher (called Takasugi, right?) was transporting the tied-up knights somewhere while getting whipped (quite happily, for some reason) by his female boss who was laughing darkly. Did they bring in ambulances as well? Or perhaps, having established a lab in a kaleidoscope before, it would not come as a surprise if they had similar tools.

Presumably due to the owner's death, the «Wittelsbach Knights» were collapsed on the ground, having stopped moving. Naturally, these sets of armor were also moved away by the Lab Chief's Nation, likely claiming them to be used as research subjects. It felt like they were reaping benefits as a third party in the conflict, or committing a robbery during a fire, but right now, Haruaki had no energy to complain.

(Oh dear...)

While Haruaki was sitting limply, he had the spear's remains in front of him. The remains of a shaft that had been sliced into dozens of fragments, as well as the remnants of the spear tip which had been pulled out of the ground before getting shredded. Naturally, they did not neglect the second spear on the Dominion Lord's wheelchair and had destroyed it together as well.

Of course, this was only achieved by using Konoha and Kotetsu's powers. After destroying «Dieu le veut», what one could call the root cause responsible for everything, Haruaki could not help but feel overwhelmed with emotion, simply staring at it intently for quite a long time. By the time he came back to his senses, he noticed that Kotetsu and Konoha had already returned to human form and the following conversation also took place:

"It's finally over..." "Yes, but do not get the wrong idea. This was a special exception, I have yet to acknowledge you as the master—" "Hold it, Kotetsu! Before saying something of that sort while standing there with your legs apart,

put on some clothing first—! I-Immorality Blocker (Girly boy variant)!" "K-Konoha, the same goes for you! Both of you, get dressed now!" For some reason, Haruaki found this very nostalgic.

Recalling that, Haruaki smiled while checking out his surroundings.

Finally dressed, Konoha and Kotetsu were talking to Aiko who was going "hweh~" while hunching her neck. They were probably making self-introductions.

With a blank expression, Kirika was sitting on the ground just like Haruaki. For some reason, she kept her gaze directed at her legs.

Then—as though noticing that things had come to a conclusion, or simply out of coincidence, people who had been originally scattered throughout the school were now gradually showing up at the sports ground.

With his arms dangling powerlessly, the superintendent was limping around. There was also the rare sight of his gas mask removed. Beside him was Zenon who was carrying Ganon on her back. "Tsk~ It's already over~? So boring~" Originally stepping on a «Wittelsbach Knight», Kokoro quietly moaned "Oh no!" as soon as she saw the superintendent and his subordinates. Perhaps she had disobeyed some kind of order.

Then from between the other school buildings, Pendragon walked over with Riko and Granaury in company. He was swiveling his arm as though doing warm-up exercises, but grinned cheerfully after noticing their gaze—naturally, it was directed at Kuroe. Kuroe simply shrugged with a helpless smile on her face. Haruaki had no idea what she was actually thinking inside.

Finally appearing was a noisy group of people who had been on the roof until earlier—Sovereignty, Kana and Taizou were waving vigorously. Shiraho and Chihaya looked like they wanted to get home as quickly as possible. Isuzu was all smiles. The usual bunch.

Fear squinted, focusing her gaze on everyone gathered in the sports ground.

With a very calm expression on her face, she looked like she was trying to brand certain things deeply onto her retinas—Such was the incredible level of her intensity.

Part 2

The square-shaped sky was visible, framed by the school building. Also, that was all they could see.

"Defeated huh..."

"...Yeah."

"The Commander is definitely the Commander..."

"...Yeah."

So weak so weak so weak so weak so weak. The truth was engraved on the bottom of her heart.

Honestly speaking, Satsuko thought to herself: "As expected." She even... felt relieved.

All she did was acquire a weapon. Someone weak like her could not possibly get strong with just that.

To her, strength was happiness. Not becoming strong meant not obtaining happiness.

If all it took was a weapon to obtain happiness... Then what meaning would that make for her entire life prior to this?

Hence, perhaps this was best.

Lying on the ground, Satsuko stroked her belly absent-mindedly. Her belly, all covered with wounds. There were new wounds from the fight as well as old wounds from long before the decisive battle—from childhood.

Both stood as evidence of her weakness. Her crime of being too weak. Matter-of-fact wounds.

Happiness was so distant, too far away out of arm's reach.

Hence, of course. She, who was unhappy, she, who had never tasted happiness—Of course she was weak.

"Satsuko is truly... too weak..."

"..."

Supposed to be collapsed by her side, Fourteen did not answer.

Did she fall asleep? —Satsuko wondered.

Speaking of which, so sleepy—She thought.

As soon as she closed her eyes, she would never see anything again.

Whether her own weakness.

Or the happiness of strength.

Part 3

"Hi, are you doing okay?"

"Do I look like I'm doing okay?"

Limping, the superintendent answered while using his right hand to hold his left arm that could not raise itself. His entire body was hurting so much as though it were about to shatter, but he remained standing on both legs and was able to talk. Considering the fact that he survived, perhaps he had come out ahead after all, assuming he was going to live after fighting the creature closest to being the strongest.

Zenon was also limping like him. On her back was Ganon who occasionally whimpered in pain, still unconscious, for whom it was unclear whether she was suffering from fractures or internal damage. The superintendent really wanted to get her to a hospital as soon as possible.

"So, what's up?"

"You're still asking me what's up? Don't play dumb."

Pendragon scratched the inside of his ear with his little finger while remarking in displeasure. The superintendent did not feel afraid. Because he knew why Pendragon was unhappy. Also because he knew clearly that all they could do was die helplessly if Pendragon had any ill intent.

He turned his gaze to glance at the woman beside Pendragon. Eyes long and narrow. Voluptuous figure. Of course, she was clothed now.

They looked at each other silently for a while.

"Tsk!" Pendragon clicked his tongue and scratched his head.

"Listen here... I'm going to become the strongest, even more than now, to become a dragon. I've already found my target too. Since I'm good-looking and have boundless love, I'll find a solution as long as I keep working hard and not give up. Rather, I should say I'll definitely succeed. Yeah, I won't give up, after all."

The superintendent knew vaguely what he was talking about. He also understood vaguely what had happened today. Because he knew Pendragon's personality intimately as well as the personality of the girl Pendragon was pursuing.

"...Isn't it far too shameless to call yourself good-looking?"

"I know right!? So shameless! Also the thing about boundless love! That's so lame, are you an idiot? Idiot idiot—!"

Pendragon raised his hand to stop Riko who was almost about to bite his ear.

"You're too noisy. Anyway, that's my top priority now. On a different note, I defeated Squishy-ko just now. Although she was strong, as expected of myself, it was a one-sided victory without any close calls. However, my one-sided victory did make me think, since I will end up becoming the strongest, if I'm already the strongest during the time before that, wouldn't other people lose the motivation to challenge me?"

Totally incomprehensible. The superintendent cocked his head.

"...And so?"

"Oh~ And so... I suppose you can think of it as letting everyone see that I'm not flawless, or perhaps to declare that I'm perfectly fine with losing one of my fangs even this late in the game..."

Pendragon suddenly widened his eyes mid-sentence as though he found speaking too much of a hassle.

"Ultimately, what I want to say is this: We never settled our score. Gabriel, this is a duel between men! Let's do it!"

"Huh? Hold on, you've totally lost me here!"

"Shut up! Riko, don't you interfere. A situation like this requires one to fight barehanded with manly fortitude!"

"So stupid, I don't wanna interfere in the first place."

Just as Riko's pouting lips went "boo~" and replied, anyone could tell that Pendragon was not serious. Hence, no one stopped him. Neither did anyone help the superintendent.

Pendragon strode over next to him. As though flicking away a buzzing fly—

"Brace yourself."

"Ooph!"

He punched the superintendent in the face. Of course, he already held back, using only maybe one ten-thousandth of his original punching strength. Let alone tiles, it would probably break a rice cracker at most. But the superintendent was in a state akin to a broken man, hence this punch was still a substantial blow, causing him to stagger.

Seeing that, Pendragon frowned as though he had something to say but ultimately did not express his thoughts. Swinging both fists to taunt like a boxer, Pendragon then brought his own face up close.

"Come on, your turn. Strike back. I will gladly take it. Because I am the strongest man, the Commander of the Draconians. A feeble punch coming from you, who looks like you're about to keel over any moment, won't hurt me at all. Be my guest."

Yeah, damn right you are—The superintendent thought.

Seeing Pendragon's stupid look while bringing his face near again and again, despite not understanding what he wanted, the superintendent knew that this farce was not going to end unless he indulged him. Hence, he halfheartedly punched Pendragon's cheek after a sigh. Fearing his own shoulder might dislocate if he punched with too much force, the superintendent made something like a light jab. However—

"Nugaaaaaaaaaaaaah!?"

Pendragon groaned in an exaggerated manner and flew backwards, even rolling back and forth on the ground. Finally, he stood up while panting and shuddering ostentatiously. Scowling with narrowed eyes, Riko remained clinging onto his arm. It looked extremely fake.

"Huff, huff... G-Good game. I... lost..."

"...Umm, what kind of show are you putting on exactly...?"

The superintendent spoke and imitated Riko by narrowing his eyes, but Pendragon ignored him and shook his head as though he were out of options.

"Can't be helped, I've been defeated as the Commander. Nobody can complain. Here, take it...!"

"Yes. How regrettable/joyous that it makes my uterus hurt. Truly cannot be helped, then I shall be taken away."

"What!?"

Granaury quietly walked over to the superintendent's side and turned to face the same direction as he was. As a result, the superintendent figured everything out.

As though saying mission accomplished, Pendragon swiveled his neck with a "good grief" and patted his clothing. When the superintendent glared resentfully at him—

"Frankly speaking, that was just a act. That man suffered zero damage. I believe chances of victory would be very low even if we attacked him. 'Master'... Although killing that lecher, enemy of women, awful man and sexual harasser would be quite a worthwhile act from the personal/global perspective. Should you issue the command, even if chances of victory are extremely low, I will still fight to my very last breath."

The superintendent slumped his shoulders.

"Of course I know it was just an act. I don't want to attack him either."

"Apologies. Because you kept staring at him."

"I just feel exasperated. Are matters of face that important?"

"Haha~ Quite important. I am the leader of an organization, after all."

Pendragon laughed.

The superintendent sighed again and glanced sideways at her. She was standing shoulder to shoulder with him.

"Say, you should understand, right?"

"Yes. Please allow me to ask in return, you should understand, right? I love/hate you deeply, while at the same time—"

She turned towards him.

"I love/hate Liz deeply too."

"..."

Of course, she knew his objective. She knew the wish, desire and dream that he wanted to achieve using the rest of his life.

Even so, she—

"I am the contradictory spear. Similar to Liz, yet different from Liz. Precisely because I am such an existence, I should be able to stay with you, right?"

She slightly opened her eyes that were almost always closed, erasing his objection with a look.

Zenon could be heard sighing.

"Superintendent, it is your defeat. I would advise you to abandon futile resistance."

"...Are you okay with it?"

"Workload would become much lighter than before with the addition of an assistant secretary. I am looking forward to it."

"Uh, umm, this answer is definitely very much in your style, but how should I put this? I meant more in terms of your feelings..."

"—I never expected any reward. Furthermore..."

Zenon turned her head slightly and gazed at him.

"From past to present, you have always gazed at a certain person while that someone by your side gazed at you the whole time. I have already gotten used to gazing at you together from the same spot."

On her face was a truly rare sight of—

A smile so refreshing that it was almost cheating.

"Hence... Even if one more person was added now, it matters not to me."

These words really backed him into a corner, leaving him with no choice but to accept everything.

Watching with mixed feelings the sight of his old friend walking away, about to go somewhere, the superintendent suddenly recalled something that had absolutely no relation to current developments so far, but it was something he always wanted to ask.

"By the way, Max, why didn't you target the Knights Dominion's *spear*? Something like that should be able to grant you the 'longevity' you seek, right? It's not like you didn't know of its existence."

"Oh? The condition in exchange for longevity is being unable to leave your own territory, right? That kind of inconvenient longevity, no thank you... A dragon must have freedom. To be constrained into using a wheelchair, that's way too lame, so I had no interest from the beginning."

Freedom. This word did suit him quite well. Stronger than anyone, freer than anyone.

In that case—the perfect match for him would be the girl who wanted freedom more than anyone else, after all. The superintendent could not help but think that.

"So... I guess it's time to greet my beloved woman."

"Hold on, I've got another question. All because you wanted to save face, other people will think I defeated you to acquire Granaury, won't they? In that case... Won't there be even more Draconians coming after me from now on...?"

"Possibly. Good luck."

After hearing that excessively free and easy answer, the superintendent regretted from the bottom of his heart: I should have punched him harder just now.

Part 4

Kirika was sitting on the ground, staring blankly at her legs. No injuries. Even if she had any, they would heal soon enough. There might be muscle pain and fatigue that did not count as injuries. No, just from looking, she had no idea what state the muscles and tendons within her body were in. It was also possible that her legs had actually suffered a serious injury, but simply did not feel any pain. Perhaps currently, the injury was simply healing slowly without her knowledge. Hence, it would not be surprising for anything to be happening.

Back then—

At the final moment, just as the Dominion Lord was aiming at «Gimestorante's Love», when she was *really about to die*. Just before the Dominion Lord swung Dainsleif to chop apart the bondage suit, the moment when she fell on the ground and dodged the attack.

She thought back to it. The more she thought over it, the more confused she became.

Was that really coincidence?

Vaguely—from the very bottom of her heart, vaguely—she had the impression that someone had pushed her. It seemed as though someone invisible had pushed her.

(No... It was coincidence. Seriously, absolutely ridiculous...)

An illusion caused by overthinking things. There were many reasons why her legs could trip. There were also many reasons why her legs could not move. Falling was inevitable too. The tense atmosphere of battle had made her adrenaline level spike up. Extremely intense emotions. Hence, it was only natural that her memories would get muddled, only natural for strange misconceptions to crop up.

(...But...)

Even if it was just an illusion, even if it was just a misconception, even if it was just coincidence.

It was also true that she had this feeling.

She exhaled "hoo."

He also existed in her heart.

As for why those thoughts had occurred to her, even causing her to make an association with him—

I will admit this much at least, she thought.

The one who was no longer around and could not be seen anywhere. The one whom she used to admire as her senior at some point in the past.

(Absolutely... ridiculous...)

Just as she reminisced about him, sighing once again...

"What an exhausted face. What are you thinking about?"

"...The fact that an annoying person is talking to me when I'm so exhausted."

"Looks like you have the energy to retort at least, even against an annoying person. Then I'm relieved."

Pakuaki swept his gaze across his subordinates in their work while he walked over to her.

Kirika frowned. She was definitely exhausted, unable to muster enthusiasm for anything, unwilling to talk to this kind of man. However, there was something she had to clear up.

"Why did you save us?"

"Weren't you the one who asked me? This is the method."

She asked him? Asked him what? She definitely remembered herself talking to Pakuaki about something during her hazy consciousness, but she could not recall the dialogue. As soon as she tried to remember, for some reason, it felt very embarrassing.

Pakuaki chuckled and said:

"Because I'm your older brother, I'll do everything I can to make my younger sister's wish come true."

Quit joking around—She thought. Hence, Kirika drew her own conclusions.

"Cut the crap and shut up. In other words... Your side cannot sit back and do nothing while this town was 'Dominionizing.' Also, you intended to claim the Wathes held by the Knights Dominion in one fell swoop if things worked out."

"These are all secondary. How stubborn of you, refusing to admit the elder brother's pure wishes. But in the end, I suppose you'll accept the reason if I give my usual answer, right? To decipher the unknown."

Indeed, she could only accept this simple answer that approached the truth. Kirika went "hmpf" and said:

"Absolutely ridiculous, what kind of delightful curse caught your eye this time? In any case, I have no interest in the things you want to know. Don't talk to me again—"

"Oh no no, it's not about curses this time. The complete opposite."

"Opposite...?"

Like a mischievous child, Pakuaki smiled innocently and said:

"More than one could imagine, this world is filled with an uncountable number of interesting unknowns. Countless. Infinite. Even if I were to spend the whole remainder of my life, how many unknowns could be converted into knowns...? Oh my, such exciting prospects, wouldn't you agree?"

Part 5

Then—Fear turned to Haruaki and said:

"Hey Haruaki, I've got something to tell you."

"What is it?"

"Take the Indulgence Disk found inside Dainsleif and put it into me."

"Eh? Right now?"

"...Yeah, right now."

Fear nodded seriously.

"Can't we put it in when we get home? Things are such a mess right now, you're probably still exhausted, right?"

"No, I'm worried my determination will waver if I wait until later. It's best to do it as soon as possible."

"Uh sure, if you say so, I don't really mind..."

For Fear, putting in the final Indulgence Disk meant losing her remaining combat power. Hence, Haruaki did not disagree with the logic that her determination would waver if she waited until later. At the same time, this was also Fear's final step to reach the goal of "sealing away the possibility of hurting others." It was not surprising that Fear was anxious to get it done quickly.

Although it was not surprising, Haruaki still felt that something was not right.

(...?)

Before there was enough time for him to figure out why, Fear had already gotten up rapidly. Looking around, she said:

"It's too embarrassing to do it outside, so let's borrow the tent over there."

"O-Okay."

Seeing her start walking, Haruaki got up too and followed her.

Along the way, for a brief instant, Fear halted her steps and looked to the side.

The scene on the sports ground was the same as just now.

There was Konoha, Kirika, Kuroe, Kotetsu, Sovereignty and others, as well as the superintendent's faction—It was like the aftermath of a festival.

Haruaki finally realized the reason.

The side view of Fear's face gazing at that scene was why he felt something was not right.

They were now inside the small tent. Probably used by lower-ranked knights to rest, the tent was not particularly large or luxurious, just a space isolated from the outside world by tent fabric.

Fear rummaged through her chest pocket to fish out the Indulgence Disk they had just picked up from Dainsleif's remains. After gazing at the Indulgence Disk in her hand for quite a long time—

"With this... I won't hurt anyone ever again. Go, put it in."

She handed it over to Haruaki. After receiving it, he saw Fear prepare to unfasten her buttons and undress. He saw the expression on her face.

By the time she realized, Haruaki was already holding her wrist, stopping her.

"You... Are you hiding something from me?"

"...!"

Fear's eyes flashed. Haruaki became certain as a result.

"Tell me. It's something very important... Right?"

She looked down. Silence descended upon the tent.

Insistently and patiently, Haruaki waited for her to speak.

Soon after, silently...

She shook her head of silver hair lightly.

"...Must I say it?"

There was only one answer.

"You must."

She suddenly relaxed her tense cheeks and looked back up with a philosophical smile.

In a calm voice, she started to explain:

"Like I mentioned earlier—I was forged from cursed steel, a device operating with the power of curses as an energy source. The Dominion Lord also crafted the Indulgence Disks as limiters to seal away individual mechanisms. In order to control the thirty-two mechanisms, thirty-two Indulgence Disks were made. Because they are limiters, once inserted into my body, only the Dominion Lord knows how to release and take them out."

Only the Dominion Lord who had met his end.

Haruaki could not help but feel this was a very ominous fact. Following this ominous feeling, his heart gave up on beating its regular rhythm earlier. He experienced a chill throughout his entire body yet hot sweat was seeping out in contrast.

Fear continued.

He was unable to stop her from continuing—

"To me, the curse arising from this steel is the heartbeat allowing me to move. The Indulgence Disks were created for the sake of eliminating curses—In other words, they are devices existing to thoroughly halt my operations as an object."

"...Huh?"

Haruaki's mouth gaped while he stared speechlessly, emitting a weird sound.

Fear maintained her smile.

"What would happen with the stopping of a curse that is equivalent to a heartbeat? Naturally, it also means that my heart will stop. It means I'll turn back into *just a block of steel for which moving is physically impossible*—"

"No, hold on, wait wait wait! I totally don't get what you're saying, I can't understand at all!"

"Haha, Haruaki, you're panicking way too much here. Then I'll make it simple... Once this final Indulgence Disk is inserted, *it will stop all the functions of the object that is me. I won't move again, and of course, I won't be able to take human form again.*"

His mind blanked out greatly.

After quite a while, only then did Fear's words slide into his mind.

"A-Are you an idiot!? No way, this kind of thing must not be inserted! How meaningless, it's too dangerous!"

With feelings of reckless abandon, Haruaki glanced at the Indulgence Disk in his hand. However, Fear reacted differently.

"No, Haruaki, this is meaningful. I must do it."

This time, Fear grabbed his hand with her little hand.

"Because my curse cannot be lifted unless this is done."

"Huh...?"

"Pakuaki also mentioned this and I have a feeling it's the truth. After all, this is my own body. When face to face with the Dominion Lord, I remembered too..."

Her voice was calm and emotionless, as though simply recounting the truth.

"My curse is very special. Born from a loathsome creation process that used cursed steel as raw materials, it could be said that I am the curse itself. This curse, which stands as the root source, is unlike the acquired curses of others that simply stick on the surface. I can be considered the crystallization of curses as a type of power. A curse so concentrated that it could be used as a power source, a curse buried deep inside, a curse lurking at the very bottom..."

As though trying to help him calm down, Fear gripped harder with her fingers.

"So, for this kind of curse that's like a crystal, the calm and peaceful Yachi home's purifying power that comes from the terrain probably isn't gonna work on me. The method of doing things beneficial to others, this convoluted way of slowly gathering positive thoughts and emotions probably isn't gonna work on me either. Because the difference is too big. The curse exists in this block of steel that is me, buried deep in the very bottom of the box."

"F-Fear, what are you talking about? Of course it can be lifted. Everyone will... Look, in fact, take Kuroe for example, she lifted hers..."

The silver hair swayed left and right lightly.

"I said it already, right? The curse plaguing me, forged from cursed steel in the first place, is different from the acquired curses of others... Right, Pakuaki also said that the analogy for what everyone is doing is like using wind from a fan to blow away gold leaf that's gilded to their surface, like wiping with a cloth. But I am a composite entity where the gold particles were already melted into the body, so no matter what, the gold is impossible to extract..."

No, no, no, absolutely wrong. Because a rejectable name was brought up, Haruaki hastily clung onto this point. Pakuaki, that guy was to blame for everything. All lies, assuredly. He had deceived Fear. Definitely. Otherwise—

"However, the Indulgence Disks are devices tuned from the beginning to be able to suppress my curse. That's why they are the only things that can take instant effect. Indulgence Disks were developed for the sake of suppressing the special curse that serves as my power source, so they can also produce a secondary effect of suppressing other, ordinary curses."

"H-Hold on. Please, could you wait first..."

"I can't wait any longer. I started out cursed by what can be called the crystallization of curses. Because I was also used as a torture tool, I am cursed in the ordinary way too. If the ordinary curse on the surface is lifted without eliminating the curse in the body's core, my madness probably won't go away. My darkness stems from the curse inside me. So, I must lift two kinds of curses—in other words, the curse at the very root inside me, as well as the curse I gained from being cursed as a torture tool."

"I'm asking you to wait..."

His entire body could not stop trembling. His mind could not operate either.

Fear pulled his hand over to her. As he watched, she looked up at him with pleading eyes.

Pleading: Please understand.

Pleading: Please listen to me.

"Haruaki, ultimately, I've only got two choices."

"Two...?"

"The first choice is to not put in the Indulgence Disk, to carry on as before at the Yachi home to receive positive thoughts, to receive the land's purifying power, to do things beneficial to people to lift the curse, like what Cow Tits and Kuroe have been doing. After a few years or decades, this would probably lift my acquired curse. Perhaps it can lift the curse arising from people cursing me as a torture tool. But even so, the curse forming the root of my being is still not going to change. It will still continue to nurture insanity and darkness."

Taking a breath, Fear continued:

"The second choice is to put in the Indulgence Disk. With that, the curse at my core will be neutralized, insanity and darkness will disappear, and I definitely won't hurt anyone again. If I remain in your home in this sort of state, in a few years or decades, my acquired curse will probably go away as well—"

"But!"

He interrupted her. He had to interrupt her.

Haruaki clenched his fist—

"But with that... You won't... be able to move, ever again! All functions will cease, turning into something like an ordinary object! I won't be able to see your current appearance ever again!"

Fear suddenly relaxed the tense corners of her eyes and replied:

"Yeah."

"...No way! What is this? How can this be acceptable? I can't do it... I absolutely can't do something like that!"

He yelled in a stiff voice.

He imagined Fear, still and motionless. He imagined Fear never speaking again.

He did not want to acknowledge that kind of future at all.

"But Haruaki, I've been thinking... I have to atone."

Fear's slender fingers switched targets for what she was holding. From his right hand to his left hand.

She switched to holding his left hand that had fingers missing.

"Fear! Don't make me keep repeating myself, how I feel about this is...!"

"It's about me, not what you think... Unforgivable. I cannot forgive myself."

After murmuring that, Fear laughed.

"No... This reason is too pessimistic, although it's not a lie."

Fear gazed into his eyes.

Then she explained the true reason.

"I want to be at your side forever. As long as I'm with you, I'm satisfied. Lifting my curse, to be able to hold my head up high and say I absolutely won't hurt you again, with a clear conscience—Forever at your side. That's the sincere wish from the bottom of my heart, which I want to come true more than anything, even if it means giving up everything else."

He could not help but notice.

That there was not the slightest pretense in Fear's words.

Because to this date, he had always been watching her, always believing in her.

He could not possibly make a mistake in seeing the direction of her feelings.

He must not make a mistake either.

"But in that case...! Unable to speak again, unable to move again, unable to eat rice crackers again! Is that really okay? It's absolutely not okay!"

"But it's nothing more than being unable to speak, unable to hug you, unable to eat rice crackers, trivial things of this level—That cannot constitute reason enough to stop me, right?"

Fear caressed the stump of his lost fingers, sliding slowly, then lifted his hand up.

She moved towards his chest, his shoulder, his neck then his face.

Right in front of his eyes was Fear's radiant smile.

"Only the joy of lifting my curse, to be with you forever at your side—Now that's truly the greatest happiness. Even surpassing that of touching furry animals, surpassing that of eating rice crackers. I'd rather be with you, even if it means not eating rice crackers for the rest of my life."

"Ah..."

His entire view was occupied by Fear. His entire mind was occupied by Fear.

He was clearly hearing words of such happiness.

But why—

Why did his chest feel so painful, as though it was about to burst?

"Putting in the Indulgence Disk is like a promise. It guarantees that I can definitely stay with you forever. Unbreakable, absolutely indestructible. When I think about it this way, perhaps... Umm, it's like putting on a wedding ring. Hoho."

Fear's shoulders shook lightly in embarrassment.

"To achieve this, I'm willing to do anything, to endure anything, to give up anything... Even giving up all the various joys waiting for me in the life ahead. My decision is firm. But, if you... if you think this isn't enough—"

She leaned a step closer to him. The warmth of her breath. The color of her eyes. The fragrance of her hair.

"...Then right now, give me a lifetime's worth."

He could not help but understand, that everything—

In her heart, she had already reached the answer.

All he could do was give her a push.

Hence—

"Ahhh, ooh, ah...!"

Haruaki's throat convulsed, making pathetic cries while he spread his arms to embrace Fear. Putting in all his strength, he embraced her for a lifetime's worth.

"Fufu, damn you, shameless brat, you're so like a child. Can't be helped, here's a lifetime's worth as well..."

Fear wrapped her small arms around his back and hugged him tightly in return.

A soft sensation appeared on his lips.

A lifetime was simply not enough. Including the next life after reincarnation and the subsequent third life, he wanted all of Fear in advance right now. He wanted Fear to fill up every portion of his entire being. Her warmth, softness, taste, voice, breath and the feeling of her hair.

He did not want to separate. He did not want to lose her. He did not want to forget her.

His tears and pathetic sobbing were such a nuisance. Clearly he wanted more, even more, much much more of Fear to fill himself, but she stuck her tongue out, licked his tears and said with a smile: "So salty." A new image of Fear was added to his heart. But that was not enough, nowhere near enough—

"We can't stay... hugging together forever."

No such thing. He wanted this to continue forever. Haruaki exerted more force through his arms but Fear withdrew as though her body were as light as a dream. Only a few strands of silver hair became entangled on his fingertips as though reluctant to part ways.

His vision went blurry due to tears. Fear gazed straight at him.

"...Put it in. This is the signal that I, cursed as I am, will no longer be cursed."

Her eyes were brimming with tears too.

However, her face was smiling.

As though conveying the message that it was truly the happiest thing in the world to be able to say this—

"...Personally, by your hand, lift my curse. Haruaki..."

Then, for a long time, a very long time...

All sound vanished from that space.

Part 6

Konoha and the others lifted the curtain, only to gasp and freeze.

No one said anything.

Inside the quiet tent...

Only Haruaki's faint sobbing resounded.

Held in his arms while he was kneeling on the ground, rubbing his tear-stained cheek against was—

A steel cube that could not be more familiar.

As though it would stay like that forever, as though it had always been like that from the start...

The cube neither spoke nor moved.

Hence, incredibly now, it did not look like a box used for torture and execution.

It simply looked like—

Receiving his tears silently and somewhat proudly—

An ordinary steel cube.



A Manuscript Recorded in One Corner on a Certain Piece of Paper

—The investigation of unknowns under the subject of curses is admittedly important, but now that research in this field has gotten on the right track more or less, there is a need to closely scrutinize new unknowns. Depending on the situation, on top of researching the concept of curses, this might turn into a crucial element that cannot be ignored.

As of the present, the 'Yachi House' is the only organization involved. Their goal is the lifting of curses. What is worth noting here is the concept they employ in that house—

Matters regarding what they call "positive thoughts."

Since they insist that kind of power can lift curses and indeed, curses do exist, it is quite likely that it does exist in practice. Hence, it is necessary to scrutinize more closely, to conduct research for turning unknowns into knowns.

So, since they refer to "negative thoughts" as curses, then what should "positive thoughts" be called? Anti-curses—plus power—positive energy—If one were to contemplate antonyms as a poet, it would be blessings—or perhaps, overly cliched it may be, how about ■—? Uh, though it is only a single word, as a researcher, it would be rather embarrassing to commit this single word to paper. I'm erasing it.

In any case, based on the special property of "erasing accumulated curses," one could hypothesize that this concept is of like nature as curses but with a diametrically opposite polarity. Judging from experimental perspectives so far, the time required for this concept to exert tangible effects is probably far longer than for curses (further verification required but efforts are still ongoing).

If this concept is of like nature as curses, negative thoughts...

Then it would come as no surprise if positive thoughts were to slowly, slowly imbue their properties into a tool's functions. Suppose a cataclysmic and abrupt overload of positive thoughts occurred, just like the abrupt overloading of curses, it might be possible to cause a feedback effect with the base body's data—namely, the phenomenon known as "humanization."

However, this probably requires even more delicate conditions than for curses. Conversely, so long as those conditions are met, it could very well turn into reality.

Take for example, purifying land whose nature is the amplification of positive thoughts. The presence of positive thoughts in extraordinary quantities. With indisputable authenticity. Provide all this continuously over a period of time almost longer than one's mind could grasp. Plus the invisible hand of God—currently within the realm of the unknown, if the final step known to people as chance or miracle were to be accomplished as well...

What used to be a cursed tool in the past, then turned into an ordinary tool after lifting its curse...

Might possibly be granted human characteristics once again, chances are not zero—

Outro

She opened her eyelids. It had been a long time since her eyes captured the data of "vision." This caused her a feeling similar to dizziness.

Gradually, she grew accustomed—Slowly sitting up, turning her head, blinking her eyes.

What was this green floor in front of her called? She recalled it was something like ta... ta-ta-mi... Right, tatami.

No discomfort. Rather, she felt a slight feeling of nostalgia envelop the depths of her chest. She recalled this was known as "smell." Stimulation experienced through the sense of olfaction. The smell of tatami resembled fresh grass, it was calming.

She inhaled deeply.

The smell of tatami connected forgotten memories together with recalled memories. She slowly allowed this smell to permeate her entire body.

Hence, her mind also naturally began to connect other things together. Originally forgotten language and concepts were awakening bit by bit.

This place—a Japanese-style room whose floor was laid with tatami. She was currently in one corner, a spot elevated one level above the floor... Ahhh, she was beginning to recall what it was called. An alcove. She was currently sitting on the alcove.

This room was very familiar. However, the stains on the ceiling, the marks on the pillars, the wood grain of the alcove, something about everything felt slightly weird to her as well.

The reason—Change. Change indicative of the passage of time.

Such as new marks, never seen before, the fading of colors, or the replacement of the paper in the sliding door, turning it pure white and brand new. While she was in a state devoid of all feeling, how much time had passed exactly—?

Her hand accidentally touched something. Looking down, she saw a small cloth resembling a handkerchief, caught on her fingertips. This stimulated an area of nostalgia in her mind. They had apparently used a similar cloth to wipe the unconscious indigo pot in the past.

Like back then—someone was probably wiping her body every day too, she thought to herself.

She lifted her hand and looked at it. Snow-white skin. Her own hand.

Something extremely warm was filling that hand, her entire body, even the inside of her chest.

It was completely unlike the curse that used to fill her interior, which had felt like cold and heavy mud. This seemed to be something opposite to a curse.

Probably due to this reason, she understood through feeling rather than logic. Since curses existed, there ought to be a warm power complementary to it. Like curses, that warm power was probably capable of unbelievable phenomena—

At the room's edge, bright light was shining in diagonally from the gap in the sliding door. It seemed to be daytime right now.

Hence, she could hear fragments of lively voices in the background.

"Hey, my tomato juice has run out..."

"...Oh no, I'm going to be late for work... Absolutely ridiculous..."

"...Hweh... Phone call, it's Kuroe..."

"Coming, coming. On a trip around the world... You should at least report back to us immediately... Where are you now...? Peru? Well, good to know that you're fine... Besides, you have a reliable bodyguard at your side, so worrying would be a waste of energy—"

Familiar voices. Ordinary, incomprehensible snippets of conversations that flew over her head but she did not mind.

"What kind of souvenir from Peru? Oh... Let me ask everyone."

"Huh? Uh, don't ask me that kind of question. It's not like I know what local specialties they have. Just tell her to decide herself, whatever's fine... Hmm, no

need to put me on the phone. International calls are expensive, right? And I'm happy as long as I know she's doing well. Then I'm off to do the daily routine."

In response to that final voice she heard...

Her heart suddenly began to beat rapidly. A certain emotion overflowed in her chest all at once. It felt like something was popping out explosively.

The thud of footsteps were approaching this room.

That familiar rhythm, she could not possibly be mistaken. Who was coming here? Without needing to think, her body already understood. Her feelings understood. It was him.

Noticing now that she was completely nude, she frantically looked around and picked up the handkerchief from just now. No good, too small, and only one piece. But under the cloth were other things.

Like offerings—there was a small pile of rice crackers presented on a dish for serving refreshments.

Just as she hastily grabbed rice crackers in a panic, the sliding door opened with a clack—

The person appearing there froze in shock, staring dumbstruck at her with his mouth gaping open.

To block his view, she crossed her arms in front of her body.

While shielding her chest with two rice crackers, she yelled loudly:

"Y-You, damn you, shameless brat! N-No looking, stay away! If you come any closer, I'll—"

The catchphrase, which was supposed to follow immediately, was stuck in her throat for merely an instant.

It was a lie that she could not possibly follow through.

She experienced for the very first time.

How unbelievably happy it was to be able to lie.

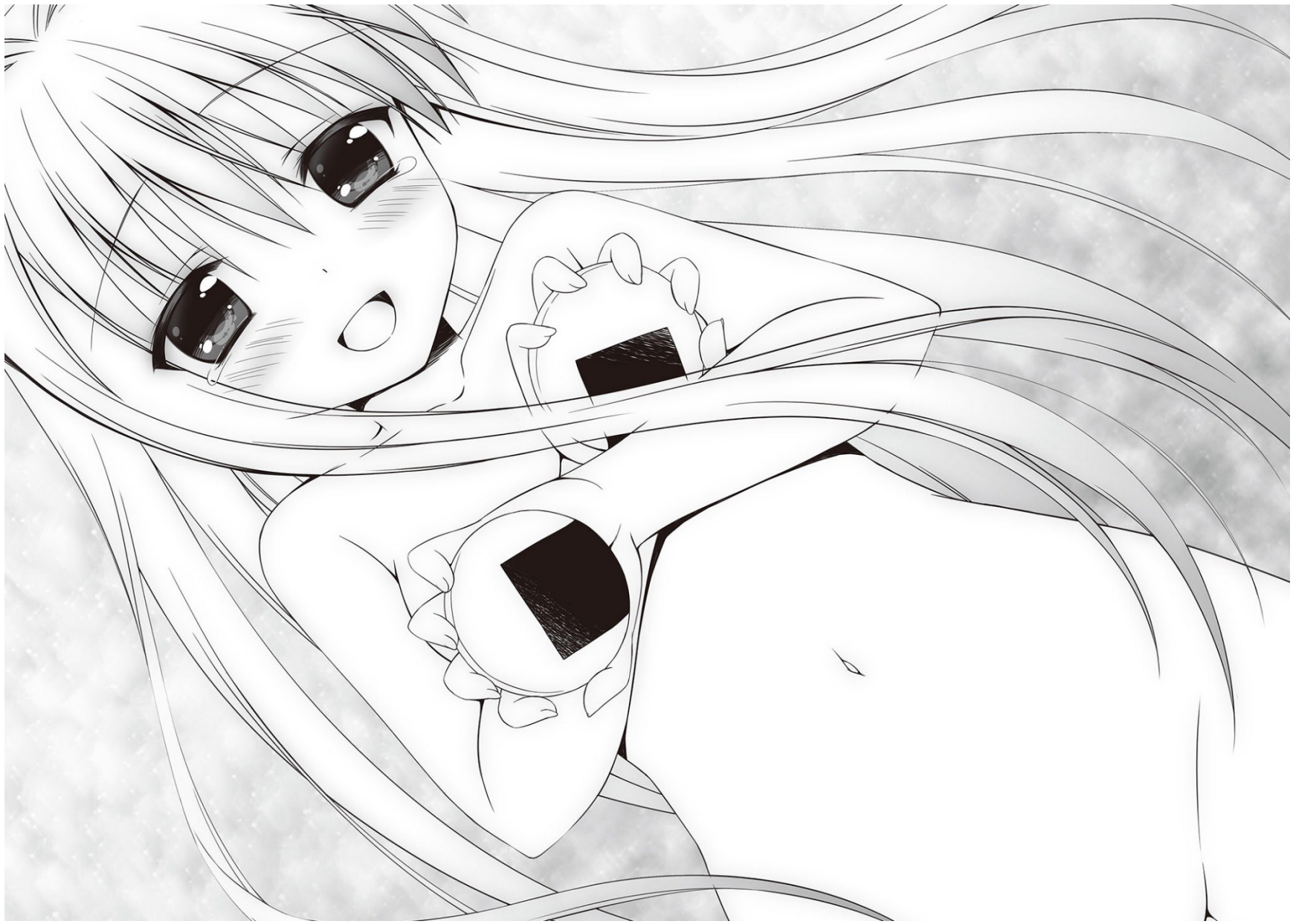
A much missed voice.

An extremely happy, first lie.

As though needing lubricant to squeeze those words out of her throat, tears naturally fell while she smiled.

"I'll curse you!"

THE END



Afterword

This is Minase Hazuki. Just as the subtitle of "Closing Episode, Last Part" indicates, this volume continues the previous book as the second half of the final episode, as well as being the conclusion to the *C³ C-Cubed* series.

Oh dear... I'm so overwhelmed with emotion. I picked up Volume 1 and had a look at the copyright page to see that the first printing was July 9, 2007. In other words, this series lasted for almost six years. In this amount of time, someone starting middle school would have graduated from high school! This totally encompasses all the main arenas of youth...!

Of course, I don't think every reader started following this series from Volume 1's release, but I assume everyone has read all seventeen volumes, which is no small feat at all. The *C³ C-Cubed* series includes many elements that most readers will have difficulty accepting, like torture tools, mild eroticism or gore, but for its publication to persist until now, I have to say it's all thanks to every reader's support. I'm so grateful to everyone! All I can say is I love you all!

As this is the afterword for the ending, I've been given many pages, so let's chat about a bit of the past.

Looking back again at when I first began writing *C³ C-Cubed*, that was the time when my previous work, *ぼくと魔女式アポカリプス*, which I did nothing but stuff it full of my favorite elements, officially received the verdict of "Let's pause here at three volumes for now..." (←a tactful way of phrasing things.) The *魔女カリ* series was not spectacular in sales. I was frustrated and felt that I needed to improve my abilities, but in terms of "reconfirming the creative reference point in my mind," this series actually saved me. I finally became aware that I actually like this type of thing.

In that case, I have to make flexible use of this revelation and not let it go to waste, by doing better next time—Thinking this to myself, I proposed my next project, this C³ series. While putting in my favorite elements yet making it acceptable to the majority of people as much as possible. However, I did worry in the beginning: "What if I also put in a lot of comedy... Uh, but, am I able to write comedy...?" To be honest, before doing this, I used to feel quite helpless towards comedic elements! But thanks to everyone, Volume 1 was well-received and when I continued to write with singleminded focus, somehow in the process, I no longer felt daunted, instead feeling "Writing comedy scenes is actually quite fun!" Thanks to writing C³, I've grown too. It's only now that it feels real to me. To avoid misunderstandings, let me clarify first that I still love dark scenes. Rather, when writing, it's those types of scenes which I write the fastest.

Oh right, I mentioned last volume about wanting to write some behind-the-scenes secret anecdotes! Since I'm already reminiscing and this is a rare chance, let me write a bit of behind-the-scenes story for each character in turn.

★Fear

Although it was very sudden, she didn't actually start out being called Fear! At the plot discussion stage, her name was Malice as in "Malice-in-Box"... As for why the name was changed, it's because at the time, Fushimi Tsukasa-san's *The Thirteenth Alice* had just been published, so the editor told me: "There's a name collision, you'd better change it..." "B-But there's no collision! The first syllable is different!" I remember objecting like that, but in hindsight, I'm so glad I changed it. Fear-in-Box... didn't roll off the tongue very well... So let's change it to Fear-in-Cube! It's also because of this change that I decided to make the Rubik's Cube a key item. By the way, the colors of the Rubik's Cube in the anime will be different, because the rights are held by a foreign firm, and on the matter of authorizing our use of the original colors, for some reason, they cough cough cough cough.

By the way, before deciding to use the Rubik's Cube, still during the stage of plot discussion, the setting was actually "transforming some of her limbs into torture

tools to fight." I actually had a heated debate with the then-editor on this matter, but was tragically vetoed in the end. Thinking back calmly, although the effect would've been quite shocking, I almost made marketability even lower than what it is now...

★Muramasa Konoha

I think I've mentioned in an interview somewhere that during the idea stage before plot discussion, Konoha was actually the main heroine! A so-called apartment-style story, centered around the demon blade Muramasa who screams "hweh~" and faints at the sight of blood, sharing the same apartment with the Japanese doll works as a hairstylist... Something like that. But then I noticed a fatal flaw in this story.

The heroine... Isn't she a bit too plain?

It's difficult for her to have much variation. Besides, a Japanese sword is basically limited to slicing... This was the kind of small detail that concerned me the most, so I thought in reverse: "It'd be quite spectacular if I set the main heroine as someone who has all the tools including the iron maiden and the guillotine inside her!" Hence, the current heroine was born. As for this child decisively getting relegated to sub-heroine status... What a tragic story. That being said, I do like her very much. I had a lot of fun writing her "warawa" version.

★Ueno Kirika

In the initial draft, she was a ordinary person + glasses character who was treated the same as Kana and the others. People who own Volume 1's first print might find on Page 268 a relic that was overlooked! Yes, that was a mistake in cognition, I'm so sorry (long overdue). Of course, the glasses trait overlaps with Konoha, so I changed it, but giving her Gime's Love and Tragic and adding the Lab Chief's Nation backstory happened rather late. I remember it was almost the final draft. The reason for these changes was that I found her a bit too simple in the story.

But as a result, she ended up taking on the majority of the bloodshed scenes and painful descriptions in the series! Oh dear~ Having Kirika seriously helped me out so much... She was like a mental stabilizer for me. When rereading this series, if you see Kirika's arm chopped off and sent flying, or deep cuts made in her abdomen, please interpret them as: "Ahhh, Minase must have been especially stressed at the time!"

★Ningyouhara Kuroe, Sovereignty, Sakuramairi Shiraho

These characters are the honors students who essentially performed as planned to the very end.

★Miyama Kana, Hakuto Taizou

I'll confess here that in the beginning, it had crossed my mind: "When should I kill them off~?"

★Nagasone Kotetsu

Originally set as just "the enemy's weapon" (until I finished writing Volume 14, I still hadn't decided his future developments), but somehow he turned into a major character, one that became increasingly amusing as I wrote more and more... What a happy miscalculation. Gender? Don't sweat this kind of small stuff.

★Peavey Barowoi

Anyone who saw the old April plans on my site would know at a glance that her original prototype was that someone from *Samurai Shodown II*.

★Marion Entwistle

I originally wanted to add this character if there was room, but didn't get the chance. By the way, she is a glasses-wearing buxom character... I think. Oh dear, doesn't that overlap with a certain someone?

★Trinac Agana

In the first draft, he was a gallant male knight who teamed up with Peavey to attack... But he was scrapped due to a later decision to make Peavey the main with Mummy Maker in support. In the end, he turned into someone else completely different, with only the name recycled. As a result, I'm the only one who secretly finds this name quite nostalgic!

Although there are still many characters I want to introduce, it'll be endless at the current rate, so I have to wrap it up here.

Anyway—I think the C³ series was extremely fortunate to be able to present all kinds of characters and allow me to write them as I pleased (of course, within the constraints of the story). Let me offer my gratitude to everyone who contributed to supporting this good fortune.

Illustrator Sasorigatame-sama, I am truly awed by you. Every time I look at Fear's character design sheets, I think to myself: "This will definitely work!" Also, there are the countless wonderfully shameless illustrations every time! I think it's all thanks to Sasori-sama's illustrations that the C³ series ended this successfully. I am so grateful to you!

Former editor Kawamoto-sama, we spent so much time discussing back when establishing this series. But I think it's also thanks to that, the series was able to last for so long. I recall we would later have heated debates over the mild eroticism and gore with neither of us willing to back down, but thinking back now, it feels nostalgic like reminiscing about a battlefield in the past. Thank you very much!

Current editor Yuasa-sama, for the second half of the series until the ending, as well as handling various production matters on the media franchise front, you've taken so much care of me. Especially, the first time I went overseas, at the autograph event in Hong Kong. If you weren't there, Yuasa-san, I surely would have perished in a foreign country! (←exaggeration) I might still continue to cause you a lot of trouble, but please take care of me!

Anime staff, Director Oonuma, everyone at Silver Link, Tamura Yukari-san who voiced Fear and all the great voice actors who provided voices to the characters appearing in C³: To be able to see Fear and all the other characters moving and talking on television... It was truly a happy time like a dream or fantasy. I believe that the light and dark parts of the C³ story can be fully experienced through the anime. I am truly thankful to all of you!

Akina Tsukako-sama who was in charge of the comic version: although the time was not long, I am very grateful to you for drawing Fear and every character with cuteness and coolness no less than the original illustrations or the anime. I am so happy to see the cat-eared Kirika short story that I love!

Everyone working tirelessly at ASCII Media Works for this series, even those in places beyond my awareness, if there is ever a chance for me to meet everyone in person, I will definitely bow in gratitude.

Although I've mentioned them already, there are all the readers who have accompanied me to the very end. I started this series with the pathetic objective of "I hope this won't get axed at three volumes again..." To have lasted this long to reach the ending successfully, it's all thanks to everyone's support and encouragement. Please allow me to say thanks again—Most sincerely, thank you, everyone.

So, even though goodbyes are always difficult, I'm almost out of pages. Spending the whole time reminiscing about the past doesn't seem right, so let's chat a bit about the future.

I've already prepared my next story.

The title is *Ayuhara Yonami Tends to Get Wet* (tentative). If things go smoothly, its first print is expected to be released in early fall of 2013. As hinted by the title, it's an ordinary orthodox story of boy meets girl (who is frequently drenched from head to toe)... I think! At least that's my goal! I would be honored if interested readers are willing to give it a look. Let's all get wet together!

Well then, I hope I will meet everyone again in my next work.

Minase Hazuki



9784048916776

ISBN978-4-04-891677-6
C0193 ¥610E



1920193006100



ASCII
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発行 ● アスキー・メディアワークス

定価: 本体 **610 円**

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